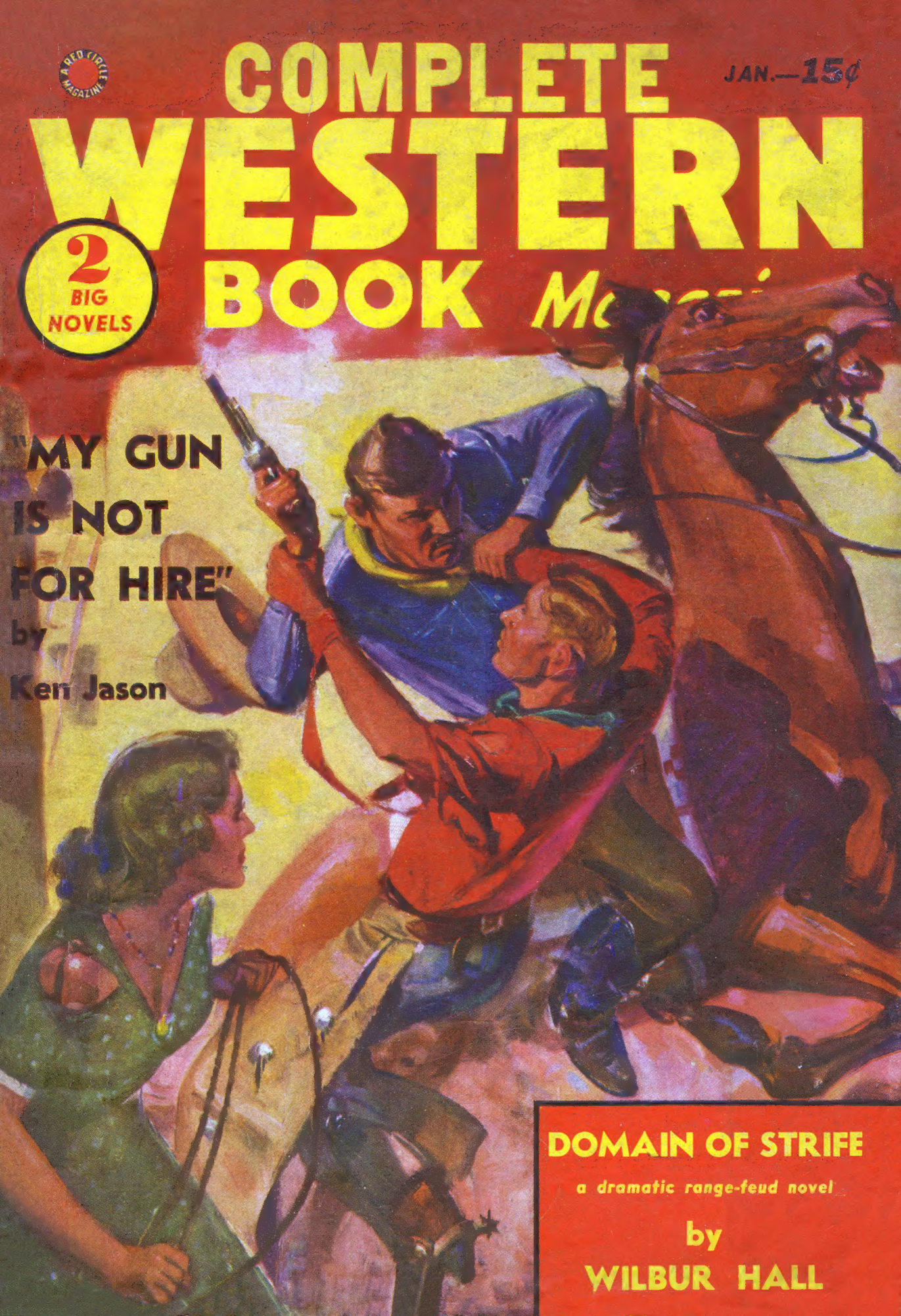
A RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE

COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK Mo...

JAN.—15¢

2 BIG NOVELS



"MY GUN IS NOT FOR HIRE"
by
Ken Jason

DOMAIN OF STRIFE
a dramatic range-feud novel
by
WILBUR HALL

BILL, YOU SURE HAVE A SWELL BUILD! DID YOU TRAIN FOR A LONG TIME WITH WEIGHTS AND PULLEYS?
ABSOLUTELY NOT! THE ATLAS WAY-WITH NO APPARATUS-MAKES MUSCLES GROW LIKE MAGIC!

Here's the Kind of NEW MEN I Build!

Do YOU Want to Be One?

CHARLES ATLAS
Holder of title "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" — who offers you a 7-day TRIAL with results guaranteed.

BY

Charles Atlas

WILLIAM J. GOLDSTEIN
Metuchen, N.J.

Actual photo of Wm. Goldstein which Physical Culture Mag. reproduced in a full page in a recent issue.

Men—meet William J. Goldstein, of Metuchen, N. J., winner of my 1936 Sterling Silver Cup! A smashing example of what my *Dynamic Tension* can do! Look at his sculptured stomach muscles—perfectly proportioned arms—beautiful leg muscles—giant shoulders. Read what he says. **"It seems like just yesterday that I mailed you that coupon. Look at me NOW! Your *Dynamic Tension* is the only system that can develop a build like mine—right in the privacy of a fellow's own home! No weights. No pulleys. No freak drugs or diets. I'm proud of the way you have made me an 'Atlas Champion'!"**

Do *you* want a prize-winning body like this? Are *you* fed up with having no strength, no vigor, being only HALF-ALIVE? Then listen—

Give Me 7 Days and I'll Prove I Can Make YOU a Champion!

That's all I ask—SEVEN DAYS! In just ONE WEEK I'll absolutely PROVE that I can give you, too, the kind of body men respect and women admire! You will actually see and feel the improvement in even this short time.

I was once a skinny, timid weakling of only 97 lbs. I didn't know what real health or strength were. I was afraid to fight, ashamed to be seen in a swimming suit.

Then I discovered the amazing secret that changed me, like magic, into "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"—the title I won *twice* and have held *ever since*, against all comers. My secret is *Dynamic Tension*. It is the *tested, natural* method of developing you *inside and out!* It not only can give YOU the powerful rippling muscles you'd like to see in your own mirror . . . It *also* digs down into your system after such needless joy-killing conditions as ordinary constipation, pimples, indigestion, underweight and overweight.

I have no use for "contraptions" that can do your heart and other vital organs more harm than good. I have no pills or other queer ideas about body-building. My *Dynamic Tension* method is all it takes to make a NEW MAN of you in double-quick time—and I'm ready to PROVE it to you in a 7-day TRIAL OFFER.

Book of Photographs—FREE

Let me show you the amazing results produced for thousands of other men! I'll send you FREE my famous book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."** It shows actual photos. It tells exactly what I can now do for **your** body! Write your name and address carefully on Coupon. Mail to me personally **today.** I'll rush your free copy to you AT ONCE! Charles Atlas, Dept. 14511, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 14511, 115 East 23rd St., New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of **Dynamic Tension** will make a New Man of me — give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name .....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address .....

City ..... State .....

England—40-42 Chandos Street, London, W.C. 2

ANNOUNCEMENT
of New Coffee Agency Openings

●

OPEN TO MEN AND WOMEN

EARNINGS UP TO $60.00 IN A WEEK

Over 350 more men and women are needed at once to open up fine-paying Coffee Agencies right in their own home localities. If you are looking for a bona fide chance to make as high as $60.00 in a week, starting at once, this company will send you everything you need, give you all the help you require, and back you up with its proven successful plans. You risk no money. A chance to be independent, work as you please, and make more than just a modest living. If you want to know whether there is an opening for you in your own or nearby locality, mail the Application below. By return mail you will be notified whether we have an opening for you, and if we have, you will receive full information about this Coffee Agency Plan. You don't send a penny—just mail the Application. No obligation—you decide after you read the plan. Don't delay. Send your Application at once.

Clip Out and Mail Today!!

COFFEE AGENCY APPLICATION

1 WRITE YOUR FULL NAME AND ADDRESS HERE!

Name.....
(State whether Mr., Mrs., or Miss)

Address.....

City and State.....

2 HOW MUCH TIME CAN YOU DEVOTE To COFFEE AGENCY?

Mark with an "X"

☐ FULL TIME ☐ PART TIME

[Full time pays up to $35 to $60 in a week. Part time, either during the day or evenings, pays up to $22.50 in a week.]

3 STATE WHICH BONUS YOU PREFER— CASH OR FORD AUTOMOBILE?

In addition to their cash earnings, we offer our producers a cash bonus of $500.00 or a brand-new, latest model Ford Tudor Sedan. State which you would prefer if you decide to accept our offer. Mark "X" before your choice.

☐ $500. CASH BONUS ☐ LATEST MODEL FORD TUDOR SEDAN.

4 CAN YOU START AT ONCE?

Mark with an "X" ☐ YES ☐ NO

If you cannot start at once, state about when you will be able to start.

ALL APPLICATIONS WILL BE HELD STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL

SEND NO MONEY

There is no money fee of any kind required with this Application. It merely tells us that you would consider running a Coffee Agency in your locality if we have an opening for you. You will be notified *by return mail* whether your home locality is available. Then you can decide if the money-making possibilities look good to you. No obligation on your part. Those who apply first will be given preference, so be sure to mail your Application without delay—NOW! No letter is required, just the Application. Mail at once to

ALBERT MILLS, President
4239 Monmouth Avenue **Cincinnati, Ohio**

COMPLETE

WESTERN BOOK MAGAZINE

WARD MARSHALL - EDITOR

ON SALE THE 10TH OF EVERY MONTH

Vol. 9, No. 5 *January, 1938, Issue*

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A sinister menace overhanging the Little Sonora—grim treachery of ruthless renegades! But Brose Fallon crashed through roaring flames and deadly powdersmoke for the sake of a wasted ranch-land and a girl owner whose bitter hatred matched his burning love.

"MY GUN IS NOT FOR HIRE".....*by Ken Jason* 94

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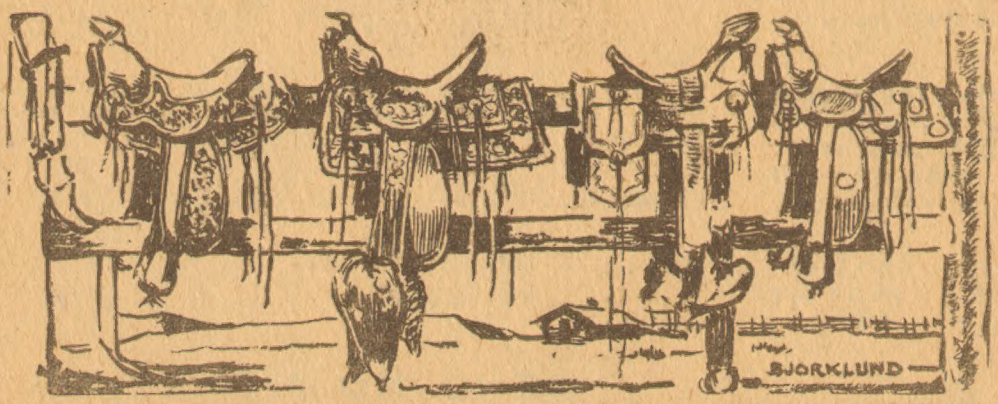
Cover painting by J. W. Scott *Illustrations by L. F. Bjorklund*



For the best, read a RED CIRCLE MAGAZINE. Complete Western Book, Western Novel and Short Stories, Western Fiction, Best Western, Two-Gun Western, Star Sports, Complete Adventure Magazine, Quick Trigger Western Novels, Star Detective, Detective Short Stories, Western Short Stories, Western Novelets, Gunsmoke Western, Best Love Magazine, Best Sports Magazine, Modern Love Magazine, Complete Sports, Sports Action, Six-Gun Western. Look for the Red Circle on the cover!

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Why Trained Accountants Command High Salaries

—and how ambitious men are qualifying by the La Salle Problem Method

GET this straight.

By "accountancy" we do not mean "bookkeeping." For accountancy begins where bookkeeping leaves off.

The skilled accountant takes the figures handed him by the bookkeeper, and *analyzes* and *interprets* them.

He knows how much the costs in the various departments should amount to, how they may be lowered.

He knows what profits should be expected from a given enterprise, how they may be increased.

He knows, in a given business, what per cent of one's working capital can safely be tied up in merchandise on hand, what per cent is safe and adequate for sales promotion. And these, by the way, are but two of *scores* of percentage-figures wherewith he points the way to successful operation.

He knows the intricacies of government taxation.

He knows how to *survey* the transactions of a business over a given period; how to show in cold, hard figures the progress it has made and where it is going. He knows how to *use* these findings as a basis for constructive policies.

In short, the trained accountant is the *controlling engineer* of business—one man business cannot do without.

Small wonder that he commands a salary two to ten times as great as that of the bookkeeper. Indeed, as an independent operator (head of his own accounting firm) he may earn as much as the president of the big and influential bank in his community, or the operating manager of a great railroad.

Some Examples

Small wonder that accountancy offers the trained man such fine opportunities—opportunities well illustrated by the success of thousands of LaSalle accountancy students.* For example—one man was a plumber, 32 years old, with only an eleventh grade education. Today he is auditor for a large bank and his income is 325 per cent larger.

Another was a drug clerk at $30 a week. Now he heads his own very successful accounting firm with an income many times as large.

A woman bookkeeper—buried in details of a small job—is now auditor of an apartment hotel, and her salary mounted in proportion to her work.

A credit manager—earning $200 a month—moved up quickly to $3000, to $5000, and then to a highly profitable accounting business of his own which nets him better than $10,000 a year.

And What It Means to You

Why let the other fellow walk away with the better job, when right in your own home you can equip yourself for a splendid future in this profitable profession?

Are you really *determined* to get ahead? If so, you can start at once to acquire—by the LaSalle Problem Method—a thorough understanding of Higher Accountancy, master its fundamental principles, become expert in the practical application of those principles—this without losing an hour from work or a dollar of pay.

Preliminary knowledge of bookkeeping is unnecessary. You will be given whatever training, instruction or review on the subject of bookkeeping you may personally need—and without any extra expense to you.

If you are dissatisfied with your present equipment—if you recognize the opportunities that lie ahead of you through home-study training — you will do well to send at once for full particulars. The coupon will bring them to you without any obligation, also details of LaSalle's convenient payment plan.

Check, sign and mail the coupon NOW.

LaSalle Extension University

DEPT. 1192-HR CHICAGO

Opportunities in Accountancy—Check below and we will send you a copy of "Accountancy, the Profession that Pays," without obligation.

☐ **Higher Accountancy:**

Other LaSalle Opportunities: If more interested in one of the other fields of business indicated below, check here:

☐ Business Management	☐ Modern Foremanship
☐ Modern Salesmanship	☐ Personnel Management
☐ Traffic Management	☐ Expert Bookkeeping
☐ Law: Degree of LL. B.	☐ C. P. A. Coaching
☐ Commercial Law	☐ Business English
☐ Industrial Management	☐ Stenotypy
☐ Business Correspondence	☐ Effective Speaking
☐ Credit and Collection Correspondence	☐ Railway Accounting

Name .....

Present Position .....

Address .....

*Names available on request.

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Get into a real live, **money making field** where thousands of men **make $30, $40, $50 and up a week** in the fascinating field of **electricity.** Prepare today for your start in a field that is full of opportunities for the trained man.

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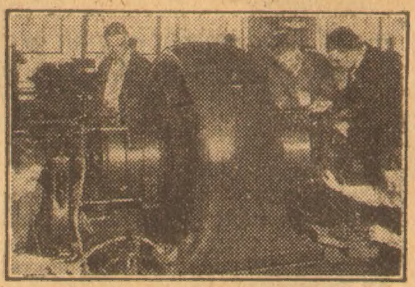
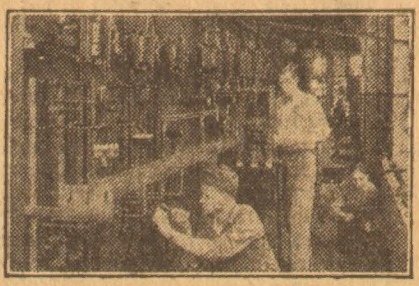


Working on Real Electrical Equipment at Coyne



A Real Switchboard in the Coyne Shops

Astounding Offer! PAY COST OF TRAINING AFTER YOU GRADUATE
Over a Year to Pay in Small Monthly Payments

Get your training first—then pay back tuition in easy monthly payments starting 5 months from the date you start school, or 2 months after the required training period is over. And you'll have 18 months to complete your payments. Mail the coupon now and I will send you, without obligation, full details of this astounding offer!

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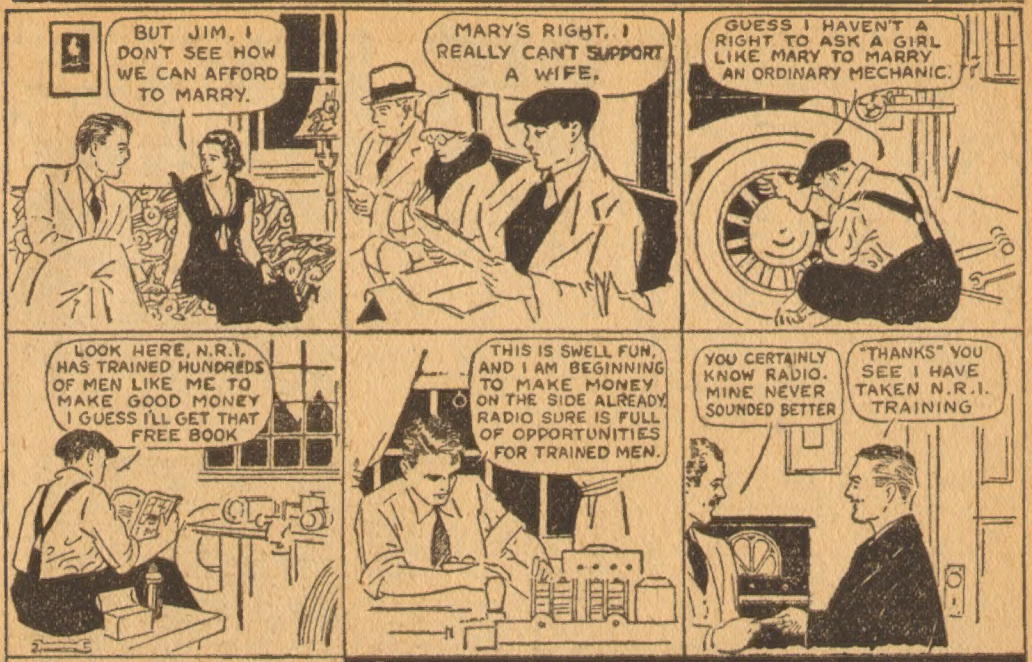
Send me your big FREE Book about Coyne Training and give me all details regarding your "Spare Time Employment Offer" and "Pay After Graduation Plan" of easy, monthly payments.

NAME.....AGE....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....


BUT JIM, I DON'T SEE HOW WE CAN AFFORD TO MARRY.
MARY'S RIGHT, I REALLY CAN'T SUPPORT A WIFE.
GUESS I HAVEN'T A RIGHT TO ASK A GIRL LIKE MARY TO MARRY AN ORDINARY MECHANIC.
LOOK HERE, N.R.I. HAS TRAINED HUNDREDS OF MEN LIKE ME TO MAKE GOOD MONEY I GUESS I'LL GET THAT FREE BOOK
THIS IS SWELL FUN, AND I AM BEGINNING TO MAKE MONEY ON THE SIDE ALREADY. RADIO SURE IS FULL OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRAINED MEN.
YOU CERTAINLY KNOW RADIO. MINE NEVER SOUNDED BETTER
"THANKS" YOU SEE I HAVE TAKEN N.R.I. TRAINING
OH! JIM, IT'S WONDERFUL. NOW YOU'RE ON THE WAY TO SUCCESS
YES MARY, AND THERE'S A REAL FUTURE FOR US IN THIS RADIO FIELD.

I'LL TRAIN YOU AT HOME *in Your Spare Time For A* GOOD RADIO JOB

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute
Established 1914

The man who has directed the home study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.

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J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 7MK1
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

HERE'S PROOF THAT MY TRAINING PAYS

Chief Operator, Broadcasting Station

"When I completed 20 lessons I obtained my Radio Broadcast Operator's license and immediately joined station WMPC, where I am now Chief Operator."—HOLLIS F. HAYES, 85 Madison St., Lapeer, Mich.

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National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.

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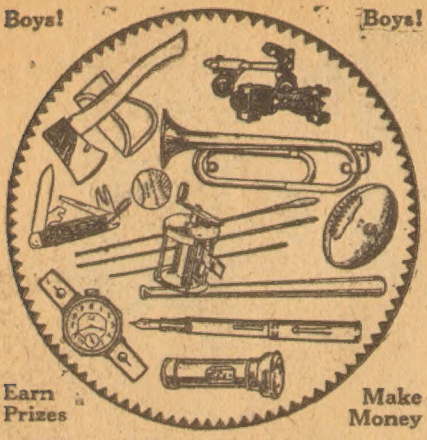
NAME.....AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

Boys! Boys!



Earn Prizes Make Money

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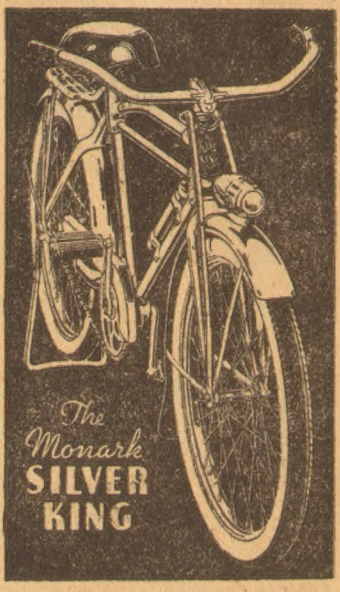
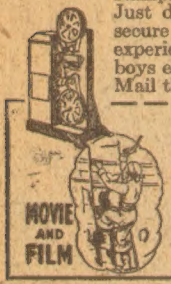
OH, BOY! What a bike! A long, low, silvery beauty made of stainless, rust-proof aluminum alloy. Light in weight, yet stronger (weight for weight) than steel. Completely streamlined bow-arch frame, 19" high. Fully equipped with hornlite with side navigation lights, streamlined sprocket-wheel guard, coaster brake, luggage carrier, frame pump, and parking stand. A truly wonderful bike. Earn it, and any of 300 other prizes. Mail the coupon today.



BOYS, 12 to 15, you can earn any prize shown here, and any of 300 others, including musical instruments, a portable typewriter, clothing, postage stamps, etc. Besides, you can MAKE MONEY. It's easy. Just deliver our three fine magazines to people whom you secure as regular customers in your own neighborhood. No experience necessary. Need not interfere with school. Many boys earn a prize the very first day. Perhaps you can, too. Mail the coupon, and we'll start you at once.



Mr. Jim Thayer, Dept. 752
The Crowell Publishing Co., Springfield, Ohio
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Address.....

City..... State.....

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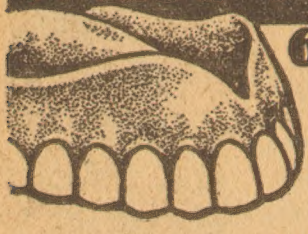

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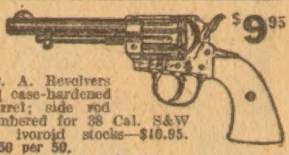
DR. S. B. HEININGER, D. D. S.
440 W. Huron St., Dept. 11112, Chicago, Illinois

"TEXAS RANGER"



$9.95

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$2 Deposit required on C.O.D.'s—send M.O. in full and save charges. None sold to minors. *New 1937 Bargain Catalog: S&W, Colts, Rifles, Air Guns, Telescopes, etc. Send 3c Stamp.*
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BUY THIS BIG NEW
DETECTIVE SHORT STORIES
12 BIG STORIES—10c

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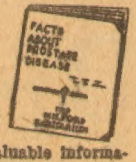
Don't Guess—Send for Our FREE BOOKLET
"Facts About Prostate Illness."



For years—Men from every walk of Life — ministers, merchants, doctors, farmers, railroad men, and lawyers from every state of the Union have been treated for Prostate Illness in Milford, Kansas.

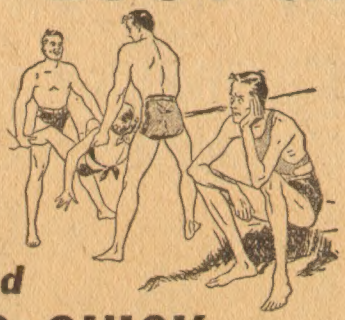
FREE BOOKLET OF FACTS

including diagrams, illustrations, pictures of our modern sanitarium, and valuable information about prostate illness. Address

MILFORD SANITARIUM, Dept. S, Milford, Kansas

NEARLY LOST GIRL

HE GOT SO SKINNY AND PEPLESS



then he gained

15 LBS. QUICK

and beat his rivals out—

Walter Schoendaller

"A bad sickness robbed me of weight and left my skin in a horribly blotchy condition. I lost all my old-time pep, and when I did go out I noticed that my girl friend seemed to enjoy dancing with the other fellows more than with me. We used to quarrel about it and almost broke up several times. Then I started taking Ironized Yeast. In almost no time I began to fill out. I gained 15 lbs. in 10 weeks. My skin cleared up too, and all my old pep came back. I'm not worrying about rivals any more and I thank Ironized Yeast."

—*Walter Schoendaller, La Crosse, Kans.*

New IRONIZED YEAST tablets give thousands 10 to 25 lbs.—*Quick!*

NOW thousands of skinny, rundown men and women can say goodbye to unsightly bones, certain skin eruptions and lack of pep, which rob them of natural attractiveness and friends. For with this new easy treatment hosts of people have put on normal good-looking pounds, cleared their skin naturally, and gained new strength—*in just a few weeks!*

Although this new scientific formula, Ironized Yeast, was developed and perfected at the cost of many thousands of dollars, it comes to you in pleasant little tablets which cost you only a few cents a day!

Why they build up so quick

Doctors now say thousands are thin and rundown only because they don't get enough yeast vitamins (Vitamin B) and iron in their daily food.

Now, by a new process, the vitamins from the special rich yeast used in making English ale are concentrated to 7 times their strength in ordinary yeast. This 7-power vitamin concentrate is combined with 3 kinds of iron (organic, inorganic and hemoglobin iron). Pasteurized English ale yeast is then added. Finally, for your protection and benefit, every batch of Ironized Yeast is tested and retested biologically, to insure its full vitamin strength.

The result is these marvelous little Ironized Yeast tablets which have helped thousands of the skinniest people quickly to gain normally attractive pounds and peppy health.

Make this money-back test

If, with the very first package of Ironized Yeast, you don't begin to eat better and to get more enjoyment and benefit from your food—if you don't feel better, with more strength, pep and energy—if you are not absolutely convinced that Ironized Yeast will give you the pounds of normally attractive flesh you need—your money will be promptly refunded. So get Ironized Yeast tablets from your druggist today.

Special FREE offer!

To start thousands building up their health right away, we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast tablets at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body." Remember, results with the very first package—or money refunded. At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Inc., Dept.9611, Atlanta, Ga.

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Posed by professional models

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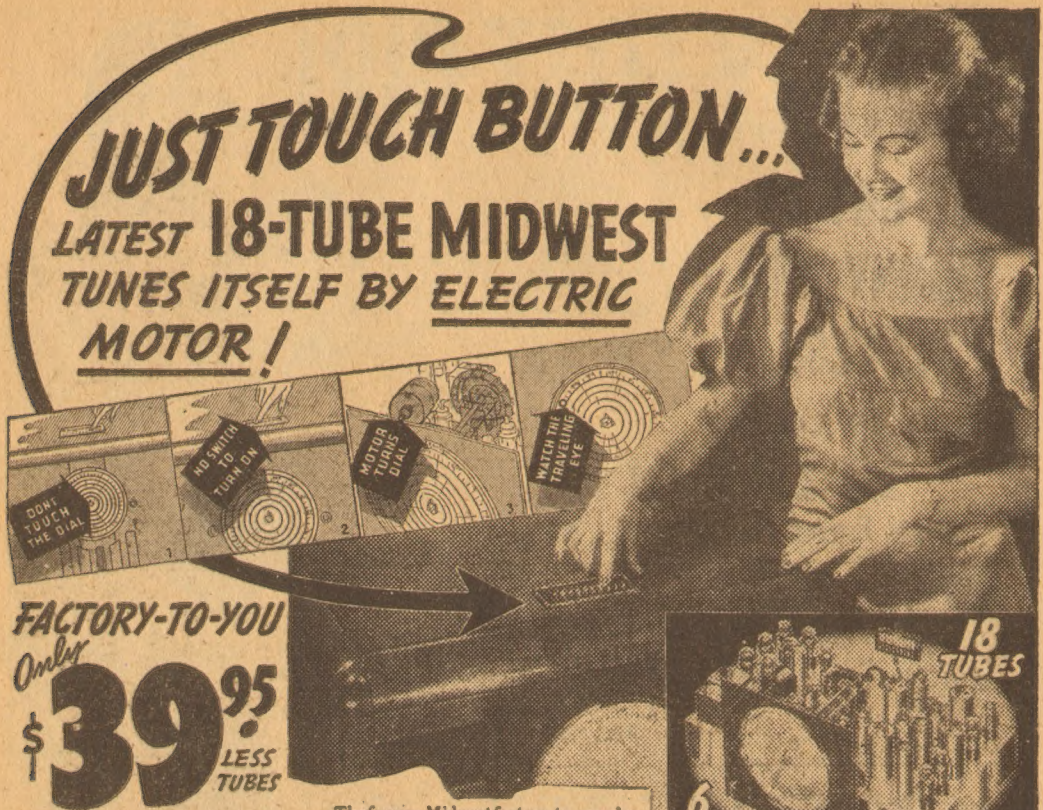

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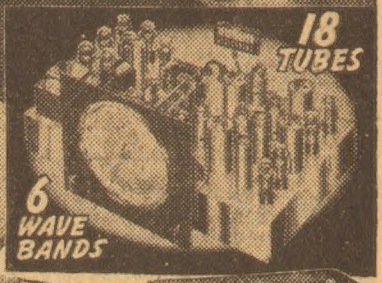
Only $39.95 LESS TUBES



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The famous Midwest factory-to-you plan, proven by 18 years of success, is just as exciting. It enables you to buy at wholesale prices—to save up to 50%—to make your radio dollar go twice as far—to enjoy 30 days FREE trial in your home.

Enjoy World's Most Advanced Radio for 30 Days In Your Home. Don't Risk A Penny!

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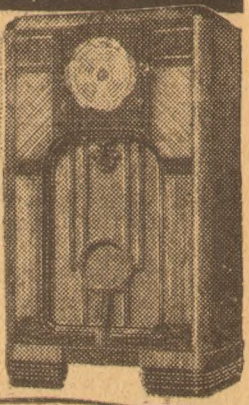

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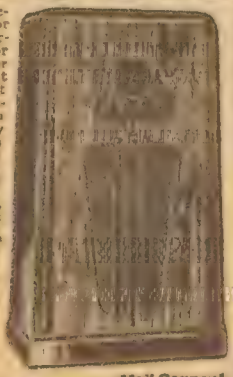

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BE FIRST!
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Big Guitar or BANJO or MICKEY MOUSE WATCH

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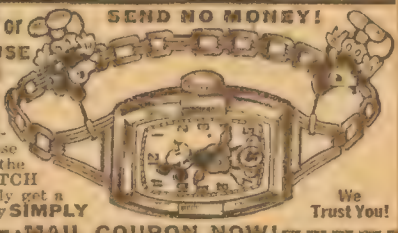

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Domain of Strife

By WILBUR HALL

A Complete Novel

CHAPTER 1

A Change of Destination

WHEN the through stage changed horses at State Line a new driver took the reins; at a place called Weingartner, where the passengers got down for lunch, Brose Fallon heard him say to the girl:

"Figgerin' that somebody'll meet you at Scando, are you?"

The girl looked at him straight and Brose liked the way she handled herself—sure and quiet but not unfriendly.

"Why do you ask that?" she countered.

The bearded driver hesitated. "Maybe I shouldn't 've, Miss Clover. But the little Sonora country has got itself a bad name and Scando's right in the middle of it. If you're bound to get off there I can't stop you."

Her face was grave when she replied: "Thanks, just the same. But you see, what I've come clear out from Evanston for is to get off at Scando—and to stay in this country you call the Little Sonora."

The driver whistled, then he grinned. "Why, I guess I put in my say where it wasn't wanted then," he observed.

Into a menacing mountain land terrorized by gunsmoke sway rode Brose Fallon—to shoot it out with a traitor and bring back a girl who hated even as he loved.

And, in a louder tone, "All right, folks; time to roll!"

Brose Fallon's ticket had been bought to carry him on west a hundred miles or more, to where his old side-partner, Shorty Glass, had a place open for him on the T & L range; now he took it from his pocket, thoughtfully tore it up and scattered the bits along the high plateau road over which they traveled in a cloud of alkali dust.

* * * *

There was no one to meet the girl called Miss Clover; lingering for a moment in his rear seat Brose Fallon saw her helped down—watched her as she went up the steps of Goings' Hotel, pass a group of lounging men and disappear into the dim interior of the frowsy looking place. Fallon did not particularly like the way that group of men gaped; he disliked even more the way one of them—a handsome, daredevil man in a bright blue shirt, orange neckerchief and silver—ornamented white Stetson—appraised her from neat small hat to trim feet in high-button shoes without gaping at all. But the last mail bags were going into the boot behind; Brose had bare time in which to slide to earth, claim his shabby, bulging valise and stand clear when the six horses answered the crack of the whip with a lunge that made tongue and reach complain and that wrenched the stage westward as though in a hurry to leave behind them this little Sonora country which had got itself that bad name.

FINDING himself flat-footed in the middle of a sun-fried street, Brose, glancing around, picked up his old bag and crossed to the porch of a weather-beaten brick building opposite, that bore the sign and symbol of the Fountain Bar. A blear-eyed old man slouched on a knock-kneed bench on the wooden platform before the place; as Fallon set down his suitcase this ancient uttered a sharp exclamation, rose precipitately and fled inside, almost tearing from their creaking hinges the pair of swinging doors. Even as he vanished a revolver shot cracked and a gale of rude laughter rose from across the street on the Goings' portico.

Brose heard a ripping sound, with the thud of a heavy bullet on the brick wall of The Fountain. But he neither reached for the gun that rested under his left shoulder-pit nor spun around to face the loungers over the way. Instead he stooped to his suitcase. That single slug of lead, most expertly directed, had creased the full length of the bag, cutting both straps and tearing off the cheap lock. The case had opened like a book, and Brose's few possessions —shirts, socks, a dozen handkerchiefs, his silk neckerchief, a pair of silver-mounted spurs he had won at Pendleton, and his worn, soft old *chaparejos* spread themselves widely on the boarding. He replaced them deliberately; took out a strap and bound the suitcase closed. Then, pushing his hat back on his head, he walked across the street to the porch of the hotel.

Accustomed to various welcomes in strange places, appreciative of the broader forms of range humor, he was minded to judge this incident according to the intent behind it. So, though he did not appear to scrutinize the frolickers, nothing about the quartette he faced escaped him. A tall, thin, stooping man and a lazing Mexican he dismissed as harmless; he was not so sure about the pock-marked individual with a hard mouth—was entirely doubtful of the good-looking gaily-dressed man he had noticed before as the Eastern girl had passed across the porch under their eyes. The first three on the porch shifted their positions slightly as he approached; they did not know what to expect and prepared themselves for anything. The fourth, who held a long-barreled gun lightly in the hand that rested on his knee, did not move an eyelash. He only looked indolently at the newcomer, a slight sneer in the smile he wore.

Brose Fallon leaned against the porch post, easy and unabashed.

"I'd like to buy a drink for the man that can shoot like that," he said.

"What do you drink usually?" the gunman inquired, in a flat tone. "Ginger-pop?"

"Where I was raised," Fallon replied, flattening his own voice, "we take the same as the folks we're buying for. So you can make it two ginger-pops, if that's your liquor."

The pock-marked man snarled, but the rangy youth shut him up with a look.

"Where you was raised," he said, "was the kids let to talk back to their betters?"

"No. We were taught *not* to talk back to our betters."

"How do you tell 'em when you see 'em?"

"The same as you tell a good hunting dog from a rattlesnake—by having met up with some of both."

The good-looking man rose and pushed his chair from him with the backs of his knees.

"From your boots and your hat and from the *chaps* in your valise over there, stranger," he said tersely, "I reckon you call yourself a cowboly."

"I don't call myself anything else," Fallon replied. He was getting a little impatient with this quarrelsome youth, but he had, somewhere upstairs in the hotel, one good reason for making haste very slowly in this new country. So he grinned good-naturedly. "My name is Fallon and I'm looking for a spread that needs a hand."

"Do you want some free advice?"

"I never take it."

"Do you take hints?"

"Not till they've got me so weak I can't help myself."

The pock-marked man rose beside his younger companion. "Aw, hell, Cody," he snapped, disagreeably, "make some motions and quit talking."

"You keep out of this, Monk!" Cody said, without turning his head. "Fallon, if that's your name, we've got more riders in the little Sonora than we want now. One of them got filled full of forty-

one slugs last Friday night and four or five more of them have packed up and left in the last few months, traveling light and fast. There's another stage through Scando at ten o'clock tomorrow. You better be on it." He turned his back, contriving to make the movement as much an insult as a slap in the face; he crowned his insolence deliberately. "Come on, boys," he said to his companions, "I'm buying the drinks—for the home-folks!"

Thus pointedly dismissed, Brose Fallon colored slightly. The honors were certainly with Cody. But, for the moment, Brose Fallon had to let them rest there. For he was under a compulsion to tread warily. The stage driver had said that this little Sonora country, with Scando right in the middle of it, had earned itself a bad name. Fallon had had one good reason for stopping off there; now as he returned with what grace he could muster to the Fountain Bar, he had a second reason for remaining.

CHAPTER II

"Who's Wolf Garrison?"

IT was less than an hour later that, somewhat refreshed and considerably cooled down, Brose Fallon entered the odorous and somnolent gloom of the Star Livery and Sales Stables. He sniffed gratefully the odors of well-cured hay, ammonia, old leather and saddle soap; pleasantly on his ear fell muffled sounds of halter-chains rattling or dragging over manger rails, of horses stomping impatiently against the stings of flies and of hay worried about or steadily munched. He knew there would be a harness room on his left as he entered—a fly-specked and dusty office on his right. He was correct.

From the office came familiar sounds.

CHIPS rattled as they were tossed on a baize-covered table; a complaining voice said: "I ain't won a pot sence the year Grant was elected. Gimme something better'n fours, Potter, or I'm a-goin' to report that that's a illicit game goin' on here!"

"If you had an ace-full, Dad," someone reported, in a drawling voice, "you'd play it so close to your chest that you'd get beat by a bob-tail flush . . . I'll bet two blues."

The old voice emitted a squawk. "There you go, Duke Mulvahill—there you go! Raisin' the ante the minute I draw a measly little pair of sixes!"

There was a laugh at this. Fallon lost a phrase or two; then he heard:—

"Danged if I know! What little I saw of her she was purty as a piece of painted chiney!"

A fourth spoke cynically.

"Way he looked at her when she climbed out, Cody Haight will know more about her by morning. He begun showing off before she was much more'n inside the hotel door."

"Was that Cody's gun I heard talking?"

"Must've been. Him and some of the boys were laughing as I came down the street."

Fallon set down his damaged suitcase with a thump and he coughed.

"Howdy," he said, standing in the door. "Any of you folks happen to know where a man could buy himself some kind of a horse?"

Of the four men lounging at the round table in the center of this dusty and odorous room the newcomer instantly disliked one, passed one—the oldster; felt that he might be able to trust two. Especially the open-faced, tanned, blue-eyed youth they called Duke Mulvahill. It was Mulvahill who spoke first.

"If you mean just something with hair on that can still stand up, mister, Doyle' Potter's got a whole stable-full back there."

A second man who laid down his cards and shifted the butt of an unlighted cigar to the corner of his mouth.

"My name's Potter," he said. "If you know a good horse when you see one, go back along the stall line and take your pick. The price'll be right."

"Thanks. I'll need a saddle, too."

For the first time the shifty-eyed gentleman, saturnine and frowning, who was the one Fallon disliked, gave the newcomer definite attention. The old man who had bemoaned his bad fortune took careful aim at a sawdust-filled box and registered a bull's-eye.

"Do you carry your own shooting-iron, boy?" he inquired.

Fallon smiled. "I've heard it hinted that a man needs one in the little Sonora country."

The shifty-eyed player spoke through thin lips. "Got your permit from Wolf Garrison to pack a gun?" he asked, with meaning.

"Who's Wolf Garrison?"

His questioner laughed nastily and fanned his cards. "Better find that out before you spend your money on a horse and outfit in Scando," he advised. "Who's say is it, anyway?"

Mulvahill threw a good betting hand to the baize, face up. "Pass me for awhile," he said, rising. "I'll see if I can help this man out any way."

Outside the office he jerked his head toward the rear of the barn. Brose Fallon followed him, liking his easy gait, his slim waist, his freckled neck. There was a corral behind; without a word the two hitched themselves to its top rail, while half a dozen horses snorted, wheeled, ran to a far corner, to turn there again and eye them distrustfully.

"You putting on when you said you didn't know who Wolf Garrison is, Mister?" the lean youth asked.

"No. And don't call me Mister. It's more than I can live up to. I'm Brose Fallon."

"My name is Duke Mulvahill."

They shook hands awkwardly, as such men do.

"If it's any of my put-in," Mulvahill said, "were you aiming to linger around in these parts?"

"At noon today I was headed for Winnemucca," Fallon said, with a smile. "But a couple of things happened since to make me change my mind."

"Don't name 'em. I'm not the district attorney."

"They wouldn't interest you if you were, Mulvahill. When they get interesting, I'll maybe tell you both of them."

"Go on shooting. I like the way you load."

"Well, about lingering around. I'm going to be an old settler here if it takes me a month."

"It'll take considerably longer'n that, if you live that long."

FALLON laughed. "Is it unhealthy here?"

His new friend did not laugh. "It shore is."

"What kind of sickness, say?"

"Well, I don't know it's got a name. It used to be what you might call Wolf Garrison."

"Oh. But now? Nothing like Cody Haight by any chance?"

"How'd you guess it?" Mulvahill stroked his jaw. "Speaking of Haight, it wouldn't jerk me clean out of my saddle to find there's been some sort of deviltry on in the Little Sonora today."

"How's that? I'm new here, you know."

"You'll get over that. What I mean is, Cody Haight has a way of working up hell and then coming into town or going over to Dorrance, the county seat, so he can be surprised as anybody when it comes out that hell has busted loose."

"That's clearer," Fallon ruminated. "You look pretty healthy to me, Mulvahill," he observed, circumspectly. "How comes it you've pulled through this—er—pestilence?"

Mulvahill lightly touched the black gun that hung at his thigh. "I pack my own prescription," he said with a grin.

"So you're kind of bad medicine yourself—is that it?"

"Garrison and Haight seem to think I am," the amiable youth said, quietly. "At that I'm likely to be took down most any day now if I don't quit the Clover outfit."

Brose Fallon picked a straw from his pants leg and put it in his mouth. "The Clover outfit?"

"The Crazy Horse ranch. Belongs to an Eastern family." He seemed a little bitter. "But if some of them don't come out here pretty soon and show some interest it'll quit belonging to them—for keeps!"

Fallon shifted slightly on the fence rail. "Who are these Easterners—the Clovers you mentioned?"

"There's one of them named Paul, and an old aunt—I know that much about them."

"Happen to know one called Miss Clover?"

Mulvahill eyed his companion without turning his head much. "Do you?" he countered.

Fallon laughed. "That's fair," he said. "I'll tell you this much; I never heard of them till today."

Mulvahill was examining a splinter he had pulled from the rail. "Was that along about noon, maybe?"

"Tally!"

"Hm-m-m! So long's you've opened up and showed me a couple of your cards, I'll say that I only know there is a girl named Alice Clover in the family. I've heard Jasper speak about her."

"Who's Jasper?"

"The super." Mulvahill spoke impatiently. "They never made a nicer old gentleman than him. But for running a cow-ranch in Little Sonora they'd just as well had the old aunt. What about this Miss Alice Clover?"

"You opined it was about time some of the family was taking an interest, didn't you?"

"That's me."

"Looks like I've got some news for you then."

"What news?"

"The Clovers are taking an interest in this spread of their's."

Mulvahill looked at him quickly—skeptically. "You plumb sure?"

"I'm sure. One of them is headed for the ranch right now, unless I'm way wrong."

"Which one?"

Brose scarcely heard him. "It's worse than I figured, likely," he went on. "And I thought it was bad enough to make me tear up a twenty-three dollar ticket."

"You're saying things that don't mean anything."

"My fault, Duke! Listen. A girl named Clover got off the westbound stage here with me this afternoon; I heard her tell the driver, back a ways, that she had come clear here from the East to stop here and to stay here. So, being a natural damn fool for trouble, I sprinkled my stage ticket along the road and got off, too. . . . Were you thinking of riding back to this Crazy Horse Ranch any time soon?"

"I'm due out there some time tonight."

"I'd like to side you, if you can't see any reason why not."

MULVAHILL considered. "I guess we're what they call in the hands of Fate or something, Fallon."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning I came to town today to see if there was any chance to hire on a couple of hands for the Crazy Horse. We lost one third-rate one last week—died of lead poisoning. And a couple more got discouraged with the unhealthiness here and pulled their freight."

Brose Fallon brightened. "That's what this man Cody Haight meant, then," he observed. "He and I made a little talk just after I got off the stage; he seemed to think I wouldn't want to stay here. And three of the reasons he thought so were those hands you just told me about."

"Yeah! I suppose so." Mulvahill slid to the ground. "And you still are plumb fool enough to want to tie up with our outfit?"

"I keep telling you that's what I threw away a good stage ticket to do, Duke."

Mulvahill looked him in the eyes. "You *are* a damn fool for trouble, ain't you?" he exclaimed. "All right, it's a deal. I'll get me a rope, while you pick yourself a horse."

"I've picked one."

"The blaze."

"The dark bay, with two stockings. He's got a hammer-head but looks to me like he could stand up under a saddle as long as the cinch held."

"That ain't the real reason you picked him," Mulvahill said. "What was?"

"Well, if you want to know, the blaze-face has been creased, I'd say—and a horse that that's been done to won't act good under gun-fire. Did you say you were getting a rope, or did I dream it?"

CHAPTER III

A Fire at Bridger's

BROSE FALLON and Duke Mulvahill were some three hours out of Scando—a matter, say, of twenty miles at the unhurried pace then set—when, climbing a slow rise, Brose observed:

"That sort of light over beyond, now: if it was pink or silver, instead of red, and was in the east instead of the northwest, and if it was getting on to four-thirty a.m.—well, I'd say it might be sun-rise. What would you say, Duke?"

Mulvahill, who had been noticing the same phenomenon, chuckled. "If it was all the things you say, Mister Fallon, I wouldn't bet you more'n a old hackamore you was wrong."

"With quite a lot of things being against sun-rise, a man might have to wait till he got to this saddle up ahead here to find out what it was, mightn't he?"

"He might. But being in the Little Sonora country some time now, I think I know."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," Mulvahill grunted.

"Considerable black smoke mixed up in the northwestern midnight sun-rise here, isn't there?"

"Considerable. Looks like hay to me."

"Does it look like whose hay?"

"Yeah. A nester's. Name of Bridger. Has a homestead over at the foot of the Kitten Hills—or did have, when I rode by day before yesterday."

"If he's got a homestead, why do you call him a nester?"

"I don't call him one. Wolf Garrison does."

Fallon laughed a little. "Oh! I see! And he *did* have this nesting of his?"

"That's what I said. But I'm not going to tangle myself up with any more guesses till we come to the rise."

"Nobody asked you to."

"I guess you're right!" Then Mulvahill laughed. "There! That's positively my last guess."

They came to the saddle—looked off through the soft, clear night. Two miles or so distant three fires blazed—one dying, one leaping high in the roof tree of a human habitation, one burning sulkily—grudgingly—giving off great clouds of heavy, dark smoke, occasionally shot with a shower of sparks—a hundred licking tongues of flame running up pillars of gas.

"A barn and a house and a stack of baled hay," Brose Fallon hazarded.

"As you say: Tally!"

"Bridger's?"

"Bridger's."

"I don't see the fire department."

"You won't. But if you look close, off to the left, you might see two men riding off."

"Maybe your eyes are better—no! I see them!"

Suddenly Duke Mulvahill broke into a blasphemous and very profane diatribe. His voice had an ugly snarl in it; he named no names, but he called on The Creator, Nature and the Powers of Darkness to blast, scarify, condemn and painfully mutilate a party or parties left anonymous, their forbears, their friends and relatives and their descendants. His dun-colored horse cocked an ear, shied—began to tremble.

As abruptly as he had begun, the cowman ceased.

"Stand still, Spinner!" he said, in his ordinary, quiet tone. "You know I don't mean you!"

Brose Fallon waited a moment. Then he said: "You want to take the trail—or the homesteader's?"

"What do you mean?"

"Somebody ought to see what's been going on over there." Fallon jerked a thumb. "And it sure seems that somebody else ought to drift along after those two riders. I'll match you or you can name it yourself."

Mulvahill considered. "You've got nerve, Fallon," he said. "I'll hand you that much."

"Never mind about the flowers! Let's move."

"All right. My idea is we'll both go over to Bridger's."

"But those riders—"

MULVAHILL swore. "Hell, anybody in the Little Sonora could name *them!*"

"And make it stick?"

"Maybe not make it stick. Maybe not pick the right pair. But this is Wolf Garrison's heavy work."

"You know your own country," Brose said. "But the way I am—I'd like to see a couple of faces—and see them close enough so I could remember them."

"It'll be either Page Scanlon or Navvy Pete or Pinto Vasquez. Three of Garrison's hellers are in Scando."

"Counting Cody Haight?"

"Yep—him and Doc Lurie. Maybe you noticed the Doc; he was holding a hand at poker when you come into Potter's barn."

"I noticed him. Three in Scando—unless they rode out ahead of us."

"They wouldn't. I saw their horses there when we left and they couldn't 've got to Bridger's this quick."

"We're just sitting here, Duke," Fallon said, patiently. "We're not doing anything about anything."

"Plague-gone it!" Mulvahill exclaimed, irritably, "isn't much we *can* do. The pair that raided Bridger's will be in the Yellow Wash by now—and you couldn't find Coxie's army there after dark!"

"All right! I'm going over to this homestead, then."

"It's about all we can do. And the way this crowd usually works we won't find anything there but the stink of hay burning."

Fallon wheeled his horse—set him side-slipping down a steep bank. "Well, that'll be something!" he called back.

Mulvahill took off his hat and wiped his forehead with his forearm. "Dang it anyways!" he complained, aloud, over the crashing and avalanching of that precipitous descent of Fallon's; "Dang it, anyways, what you going to do with a man like that? After he's cussed shadows and picked quarrels with thin air a while, maybe he won't be in such an infernal rush! . . . Well, come on, cow-horse! Let's go down and view the remains, as the saying is!"

Unless you counted smouldering embers and a pile of hay being slowly consumed, there were no remains to view.

"Did this man Bridger live here alone?" Fallon asked, when he and Mulvahill had canvassed the situation—with one glance.

"Nope. Had a wife and a girl and a freckle-faced boy."

"Even Garrison wouldn't massacre a whole family, would he?"

"Oh, he *would!* And has, according to the stories."

"But not here—not this time?"

"Likely not. The Bridgers maybe were away. But there's half a dozen head of riding stock hanging around, trying to burn their eye-brows off."

"I saw them. The hay could have set itself afire. But that wouldn't account for the house and the barn."

"Go on," Mulvahill said, ironically; "reason yourself out of it! Don't look like you believe Garrison is *possible!*"

"I'm a thousand miles off my range here and I've been known to figure wrong once or twice in the—" Fallon stopped, listening.

"I heard it too!" Mulvahill said, lifting his head. And, opening his mouth, he emitted a cow-boy yell that could have been heard in Scando.

A faint cry came back.

"Sounds like the kid."

"Scared out, likely."

"Sounded healthy." Mulvahill called again. "That you, Morrie?"

"Yeah! Who's that?"

"Mulvahill, from the Crazy Horse."

"Did paw git there?"

"Did what? Come on over here and show yourself."

"Them varmints clean gone?" The boy's voice was closer now.

"Clean gone. You're all right?"

A wiry youngster of fourteen or fifteen appeared in the sullen light the burning hay made.

"Who's that there with you, if you're Duke Mulvahill?"

"Aw, come on! We can't wait here all night! Where's your folks?"

"Maw and Ethel're to town. Jest paw and me was here."

"Where's your paw?"

"Why, didn't he send you over? . . . No, he couldn't of! Ain't had time. How'd you come to come by?"

"We were coming by. What happened, Morrie?"

"What happened when?"

"How came your place to get set afire?"

"Why—wel—! Way it was—" He came to a full stop.

BROSE FALLON spoke for the first time. His voice was very quiet. "They told you not to tell. Is that it, Morrie?"

The boy looked at him scrutinizingly. "I don't know you, Mister," he said, a little doggedly.

"That's right, you don't. And if you were told not to tell—don't tell."

"Them—they'd—I'd get my throat cut if I did, they said."

"And your father—where did you say he'd gone?"

"They run him. But he'd go to the Crazy Horse if he could get there."

Fallon turned to Mulvahill. "How far is it to your headquarters, Duke?"

"Call it twelve mile—'cross the hills."

"Did your father take a horse, Morrie?"

"Horse, hell! He took shank's mare! They run him, I tell you." The boy

choked. "Maw's been beggin' paw to clear out. He had his orders, paw did—two months ago. But paw said this was a white man's country." His voice broke. And now look what they been and done! An' they shot my Star Hawss, too!" Tears rolled down his cheeks, though he dashed them away violently—tried to hide them. "I wisht I was growed-up!" he cried, vehemently.

"You'll grow," Brose Fallon said. And, turning: "Well, Duke?"

"Yep. We'll sift! Come on, Morrie—I'll give you a hand and you can ride behind me."

"I'd rather ketch me up one o' our hawses."

"You'd have a time right now. They're upset with the fire—and in the dark and all. I'll get you a horse from our place."

"You mean—to keep? The's a little buckskin cayuse in the Crazy Horse cavvy I'd shore like."

"Well, I'll get you the loan of one, anyhow."

The boy was diverted. "All right! But maybe Mr. Jasper'd lemme buy the buckskin, if I could get me the money." He took Mulvahill's outstretched hand—caught a saddle thong—squirmed up. Mulvahill's mount snorted, put his head down—began to pitch.

"Hang on, Morrie!"

"I'm a-hangin'!" His knees caught and he laughed. "Ride 'em, cowboy!" he shrilled. "Crow-hop, you son-of-a-gun!"

He was still talking about getting the money to buy himself the buckskin cayuse when, an hour later, they pulled up at the spacious horse-barn of the ranch-house that little Eastern girl had come out from Evanston to take an interest in.

CHAPTER IV

An Owner Moves In

A GOOD crowbar, shaped when the angles are red and then tempered, makes a triangle with a musical series of notes that can be heard a long ways; it was that sort of a triangle, vigorously rung, that wakened Brose Fallon the next morning. The Crazy Horse bunk house had places for twelve hands, but there were no blankets in half of them. Now a dark, fattish man was pulling on his boots opposite; a youth with a horse-face was shaving before a broken mirror by one dingy window; Duke Mulvahill turned over in his bunk, yawned, pulled the covers above his head and began to snore again.

"Hi, Mulvahill!" the fat man called, "you sick?"

Another snore answered him.

The fat man looked at Fallon with a grin. "I had an uncle like that onct," he volunteered. "He could s l e e p through a stampede and a pray-ree fire, both! One time our house caught fire and when my brother, Fred, went to call Uncle Ambrose he was leaning out of the window, emptying the water pitcher on the flames—and sound asleep."

Fallon laughed. "Did they manage to get him awake?" he asked, obligingly.

"Uncle Ambrose? No." The fat man reached for his other boot. "No. Couldn't rouse him. The fire burned up behind him and caught his shirt tail on fire. That brought him to. He leaned out and yelled to father: 'Homer!' he says; 'Homer! Got any quinine? I think I've woke up with a fever!'"

The horse-face boy cackled. "You let him get you, stranger!" he said, in a mournful voice. "Now won't be any living with him for a month!" He stepped to Mulvahill's bunk, jerked the covers into the middle of the floor and was shaving again when the sleeper swung his long legs out and looked around, glowering.

"Hello, Fallon!" he said. "Want coffee in bed?"

"I had it," Brose said, gravely. "And a good show while I was eating my toast and marmalade. Did you happen to think this was Sunday?"

"Me?" I should say not. But I have to have my beauty sleep." He raised his voice. "Whose blankets are those out there? Has anybody seen my pants?"

Morrie Bridger appeared in the bunk-house door.

"Dad's here," he said. "They cut him up pretty bad."

"What's that?" the fat man asked, sharply. "Who rung for you, kid?"

"Lay off him!" Duke Mulvahill said. And to the boy: "He'll be all right, Morrie. Did you find that buckskin you

were talking about?"

"Sure did! Say, Mr. Mulvahill, will you ask Mr. Jasper kin I buy him?"

"I'll negotiate! By the way, Fallon, the stout man acrost is Ferry Bowles. That there dude putting perfumery on hisself is Two-Deck Converse. Meet Brose Fallon, boys!"

"Howdy!" Bowles grunted. "An uncle of mine married a girl named Fallon. You happen to be any kin to the—"

"That makes ninety-one uncles you've had in seven months, Ferry!" the long-faced youth cut in. "And this ain't perfumery, Mulvahill! It's poison oak medicine."

"They smell the same to me," Duke observed, laconically. "I notice you're getting into your working clothes, Brose."

"What's wrong with that?" Fallon inquired, casually. "Is this a holiday or something?"

"You ain't even hired till Jasper says so, you know."

"I don't have to be hired to get out of my nineteen-dollar store clothes, do I? And where's the wash-trough?"

"Wash-trough? Huh!"

"Gee, they got a swell place to wash here, Mr. Fallon!" the boy broke in. "Hot water. And a clean towel! The Crazy Horse is swell!"

"A clean towel?" Brose inquired, blankly. "I dont' believe you! Where is it? I've only seen one clean towel in eight years cow-riding, and that was in a store in Bozeman! Come on, Morrie; let's have a look-see!"

Ferry Bowles watched the new-comer swing through the door and away, the boy chattering ahead of him like a magpie. He jerked a thumb.

"Cattlemen's Protective agent, Duke?" he inquired in an awed tone.

"Him?" Duke countered. "I ain't sure. I think he's a rev'noo officer from Washin'ton and if I was in your place I'd hide that bottle of Indian corn you got under the bed."

"Fallon?" the boy with the long face repeated, slowly. "I don't recollect seein' him on this range before no place."

"Prob'ly not," Duke said. "No. He told me he was a cowhand in Delaware till rustling got so bad there he went broke and sold out to a glue factory."

"You never tell a fellow anything, Duke!" Converse complained, unhappily.

"I don't? Well, that's just an oversight, Two-deck. "I'll tell you something now."

"Some damn lie!"

"No—just the damn truth! Some of Wolfs Garrison's cantamounts ran old man Bridger off his homestead last night, 'l o n g towards midnight, and burned down everything he had standing."

THE two riders swung about to face him.

"The low-down varmints!" Converse exclaimed.

Ferry Bowles took a long breath. "Oh!" he said. "All right! The Crazy Horse is about next, then, I reckon." He stamped one foot to settle it in his boot. "Well," he went on, slowly, "I'm too old to desert and too fat to run. So I guess I'll find me a flat rock and get one of Wolf Garrison's gang from behind it, before the coroner gets *me*. You folks eating, or does this business sort of dull your appetites?"

Mulvahill said, when he and Fallon had finished breakfast: "Better come in and meet up with Jasper."

"Whatever you say."

In a narrow, long room, half den, half office, in the ranch house, they found a fine-looking, tall, elderly man, carefully dressed—looking citified to the range-bred Fallon. At one end of the desk was a gaunt, weather-beaten, seedy individual, with a three-days' growth of beard and a stained bandage around his head.

"This is Brose Fallon, Mr. Jasper," Mulvahill said, at the door. "Hello, Bridger."

"Howdy!"

"What's the name?" the superintendent inquired, peering through his nose-glasses. "Mellon?"

"Fallon," Brose corrected him. "I'm looking for a job."

"He was the likeliest man in town, Mr. Jasper," Mulvahill put in. "The rest of 'em weren't worth having or else they figured themselves worth too much to take the chance of coming."

The superintendent turned to Brose Fallon. "I—we need help here," he said, hesitantly. "But I couldn't consider engaging a man without warning him of—"

Duke Mulvahill grinned. "You'd waste time warning this *paisano*, Mr. Jasper," he said. "He just naturally don't know what that means!"

The bandaged man, Bridger, grunted. "He'll plagued soon find out, in the Little Sonora," he said. "I used to be that kind of a fool myself!"

Jasper was surveying Fallon, who stood easily, whittling his tooth-pick with a pocket knife—catching the fine shavings in his steady hand.

"Where you from, young man?" he inquired.

"I've ridden Montana and Wyoming range, mostly, Mr. Jasper. I was in Colorado a year with the Timkin-Wheeler outfits."

"We—ahem!—as you may have heard, we are having—ahem!—some trouble here on the Crazy Horse. Not on the ranch! In this vicinity. If you were hired you might—er—regret it."

"I'd regret it if I wasn't hired and missed any fun," Brose said, with an engaging grin. "Since I was sixteen it seems like I've sort of filled out and put on weight on trouble."

Jasper spoke quickly and for the first time firmly.

"Don't misunderstand me, Fallon. Nor you, Mulvahill. Nor Bridger! Let this be made clear. The Crazy Horse will not *make* trouble nor keep trouble-makers on the payroll. We want peace."

"Looks like you'd get it!" Bridger growled, deep in his throat. He struck the desk top. "My God, Jasper, you go on a-sticking your head in the mud like a shitepoke a while longer an' the' won't *be* no Crazy Horse—leastwide—"

All four of them had been more or less conscious of an approaching team and vehicle. Now they could not avoid the interruption it caused. It came to a stop at the hitch-rail, the brake locking. A man said:

"This is it, Miss Clover!"

"Thanks so much!" It was a clear, pleasant feminine voice that answered. "I'll take the bags—!" Her words were lost.

Jasper, the superintendent, had started up from his chair. "Clover?" he exclaimed. "Miss Clover? Why, what on earth—?"

"Alice Clover," Brose Fallon said, quietly. "From Evanston, I think she said."

Outside the driver was speaking again: "Shucks, Miss Alice, you don't think I'm going to leave you flat, do you?"

"I don't want to keep you—!"

"You'll have a hard time not keeping me!"

Except for Brose Fallon, the men in the office had turned to face the door.

In it, a step behind the girl and now putting his right hand on the door jamb so it almost rested on her shoulders—seeming mockingly to offer her protection—stood Cody Haight.

CHAPTER V

Duke Figures a Price

IN the position of a stranger asking for a job, Fallon, on entering, had leaned against the wall almost at the door; the girl, moving to the office desk, saw only the others. She put out a gloved hand.

"How do you do, Mr. Jasper," she said, simply. "I'm Alice Clover, if you don't remember me."

"Remember—ahem! Of course I do! I'm—I'm bewildered at seeing you, though. I hadn't heard—but our mail service is not always dependable."

Bridger struck in: "Garrison gits *yore* mail, too, does he?" he inquired.

Duke Mulvahill turned on him. "This ain't your put-in, Bridger," he said, evenly. "And it's getting crowded in here; let's four or five hundred of us get moving!"

"Please not on my account," the girl said. "I just wanted to let you know I was here, Mr. Jasper."

The elderly superintendent was obviously flabbergasted. Events piled up on him, who was not too ready for them at any time.

"This is Duke Mulvahill, Miss Clover. He's a sort of foreman. And Mr. Bridger's a neighbor."

"How do you do!"

"Howdy!"

"Nothing for us to stand around underfoot for, Mr. Jasper," Duke said. "We won't stray far, anyhow. Come on, Bridger."

"Oh! and behind you, Miss Clover, is Mr.—Mr.—!"

The girl turned. Then all expression left her face. "I've seen this man before," she said, sharply. "But I don't understand why he should be here."

Brose Fallon raised his eyes to hers, but did not change position of head or body.

"I didn't know it was against the rules, Miss Clover."

She turned to Jasper. "Perhaps we *had* better have a little talk," she said. "There are several things—" She stopped, coloring slightly. "Oh, I'm so sorry! Do you know Mr. Haight, Mr. Jasper? And you gentlemen?"

Jasper ran his finger around his collar, appearing to try to loosen it. He shuffled papers on his desk with his left hand.

"I'm acquainted with the name," he said, haltingly. He spoke to Mulvahill. "I guess you can have the boys go on with—with whatever they were doing," he said.

Duke Mulvahill gave his glance squarely to Cody Haight, in the door. "Why, they *were* talking about going out hunting," he said.

"Hunting?"

"Coyot' hunting!"

"An' I'm goin' to ride with 'em, too!" Bridger exploded. "Coyot'—c a n t a - mount—skunk—any kind o' varmint we can turn up or dig out!" He swallowed with difficulty against his anger. "Or house-burners, neither!"

Cody Haight offered his first contribution. "That sounds interestin'," he drawled. "Which way were you planning to ride, Mulvahill?"

"We might have to let you ride first to decide," Mulvahill snapped.

"See here," Jasper broke in, irritably; "what is all this? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, h e c k!" Mulvahill snorted; "we're all of us mostly talking too much! Come on, Bridger!"

This time the homesteader rose and moved toward the door at the foreman's heels. Brose Fallon wheeled, bringing himself face to face with Cody Haight.

Haight spoke in so low a tone, almost without moving his lips, that only Fallon heard him.

"You missed that stage, cow-hand!" he said. "For you—there won't be another one."

Fallon took him up instantly, and in a voice they could all hear. "That's all right, Haight," he said, carelessly. "Stages've quit interesting me. I've found a country I like well enough to stay in!" He turned to bend his head a trifle to the girl. "Pleased to have met you all," he said, and walked out, just barely flicking Cody Haight's lighted cigarette with his big hat as he swung it carelessly to his head.

DUKE MULVAHILL, following, was the only one to see Haight's gun-hand twitch. But Haight did not lift that hand. He gave Mulvahill a sinister smile; then stepped forward into the room as the foreman and Bridger followed Brose Fallon outside. All three heard him address Jasper.

"Maybe I ought to tell you how I came to drive Miss Clover out, Jasper," he said, in his suavest voice. "Scando isn't much of a place for a girl, you know; on top of that she's had some trouble with a fresh fellow on the stage—that got off there when she did. So, you see, I couldn't hardly do anything else but—"

Mulvahill, moving up on Brose Fallon, saw the newcomer's ears redden—noticed that his foot dragged in taking a step.

"Wait a minute, now, cow-boy!" he said, putting a hand on Brose's shoulder. He laughed. "Plagued if it don't look like to me you're coming down with the first signs of that Little Sonora plague we was a-talking about yest'day!"

Fallon held himself for a moment—then laughed. "You're right, Duke! But that one about getting fresh with a lady—!" He paused. "Say, that's funny, too!" he added, thoughtfully. "She must have told Haight that story!" They moved side by side toward the horse-barn some steps. Then Fallon exploded. "I *am* a blamed fool! Of course she didn't! Not that girl! Haight could talk her into half believing it, but she never started it!"

"W-well," Mulvahill observed, cynically, mebbe not! You can't always tell about these women-folks, though, Brose!"

Fallon snapped him up. I can tell about this one—from here to hell and back—and hard riding both ways! What about that hunt you were talking about, Duke? Was that on the level—or was it just putting a burr under

Haight's saddle-blanket, which?"

"It was talk till we get more help than—"

But the straw boss was interrupted. Jasper's voice was heard calling from the porch of the office.

"Duke! Come on back! And bring that young stranger with you."

Fallon, half-turned, looked into Mulvahill's eyes. "That comes too soon to be good news," he said.

"I'm getting used to bad," the foreman said. "And plenty tired of it, too. Well, let's go back and get all the calamity over with."

As they stepped from the graveled path to the porch both heard the girl, inside, say crisply: "I'll handle this, Mr. Jasper."

"Yes, my dear."

"Was you calling us?" Mulvahill inquired, guilelessly.

"I asked Mr. Jasper to call you back, Mr. Mulvahill," Alice Clover said. "He tells me that you brought this new man here—to look for a place—a job, you call it."

"Sometimes we call it 'a hoss to ride'," Mulvahill said, stalling.

"Mr. Fallon will get no horse to ride on this ranch!"

Mulvahill scratched his head. "Who's say-so?"

"Mine."

"Oh! I take it you've got rights to *have* a say-so."

"Miss Clover is one of the principal owners of the Crazy Horse," Jasper interrupted. "And in this matter—ahem! —she has the final—or—say-so!"

"Except a few words I'd like to put in," Cody Haight drawled, "When the lady is finished."

"Please, Mr. Haight!"

"Yes ma'am! I said, when you were finished."

"I mean, please keep out of this. It's between me and Mr. Fallon."

"Yeah!" That slow drawl on the lips of this handsome daredevil held her. "Yeah, I understand that. But there's a few things between this man and me, too."

"Oh!" She was disconcerted—frowned—put a finger to her lips and seemed to bite it. Then: "As far as this ranch goes, Mr. Fallon, the sooner you leave it, the better. You aren't wanted here."

"That's all I need," Brose said. "I'm sifting." He made that small bow to her, with his head and shoulders, swinging his hat up. Then he checked both bow and swing. "But I'd like for you to remember one thing, Miss Clover."

"I won't promise to remember anything of you!"

"No?" Brose Fallon smiled at her, leaving all the rest of them, and the world beside, out of it. "You'll remember longer than you think now," he said, quietly—boldly.

She flamed. "I wish—"

"Wait a minute, please, lady! I started to say something different. I started to say you can remember that, when you need me, I'll be where you can get me—quick! That's all. His hat went on and under it he went outside.

DUKE MULVAHILL'S face had been growing red. Now he stepped to Jasper's desk.

"You backing the play, Jasper?" he asked, abruptly.

"Certainly. You heard what I said about Miss—"

"I heard." Duke took a ring of keys from his pocket—a tally book. He dropped them before the super. "And I'm siding this boy you've just kicked in the face—you and your Crazy Horse spread!" He confronted the girl. "I want to tell you something, Miss," he said, his voice growing thick with anger. "If you don't know any more about running a ranch than your superintendent does, you can put me down for a standing offer for the Crazy Horse brand, a year from now—one dollar, Mex.!" He whipped his forearm across his damp brow. "And one more thing; if you can't pick between men any better'n what you've picked since you've been in the Little Sonora, I'll make that bid of mine *cinco centavos*—five cents—because the Crazy Horse won't be your's to sell in *half* a year!"

He heard her gasp—knew that she sought words. He did not wait for them, but stomped out.

Cody Haight followed him—swift as a cat.

"Fallon! Mulvahill!"

Brose yelled. "Watch him, Duke!"

No man could tell which of the two—Fallon or Haight—was swifter on that draw. In a split second there would

have been firing—at point-blank range; between that pair there would have been blood shed.

But Alice Clover, screaming: "Don't!" was quicker than either.

She flung her arms about Cody Haight—knocked his gun down, smothering him.

Brose Fallon's trigger finger had been given the impulse from his brain and it was too late to stop it. But not too late for him to jerk his hand up, even as the hammer fell.

His bullet splintered the lintel of the old office door-frame.

"That's too bad, Haight," he said, coolly, screwing the barrel muzzle against his arm to wipe the powder smudge from it. "I had that one named for you! But there's more where it came from. So long! I'll be seeing you both again!"

In the horse barn, saddling deftly, Mulvahill turned to his new side pardner.

"You made good talk, Brose," he said. "But what in hell do you mean—you'll be where the girl can find you?"

"I'm not clear sure, Duke," Fallon said, stooping for a cinch ring. "But I've just had an idea."

"You act to me like you're full of 'em—mostly wild."

"Maybe. But this one seems to stand up. I think I'll find your neighbor, this man Bridger, and buy out his homestead."

Mulvahill straightened, staring—his mouth agape. But Brose Fallon busy with a *latigo*—went on, casually: "Yep, that's the idea. I've always wanted to have my own brand; now it looks like I'd have my wish—with trimmings! Where did Bridger go just now—happen to know?"

CHAPTER VI

Brose Buys a Brand

NOT so long ago there were many regions in the west that, like the Little Sonora, bore bad reputations.

This particular area had never had a very good one; for half a century it had been a hiding-place and refuge for renegade Mexicans and half-breeds and its colloquial name had been given it in their honor. Just when Wolf Garrison had moved in and begun his penetration of its nooks and corners no one knew clearly; what they did know was that he had done a thorough and workmanlike job when he came.

That was in a day when strong men took what they wanted by direct and forceful methods; Garrison was probably no worse than others. Part of the basin he had come into possession of by lawful means, through entry, development of purchase, but where his rights ran out he extended them by the simple process of making it uncomfortable—unhealthy, Mulvahill had said—for the small owners, homesteaders, squatters and floaters who tried to get a foothold there.

In the end, with the exception of three or four who occupied down-at-heel claims that were of no use to him, Garrison came to hold everything in the Little Sonora except Bridger's homestead and the Crazy Horse. The latter ranch and its adjoining range ante-dated Garrison; people said that, years before, he had been on apparently friendly terms with Howard Clover, the Easterner who had inherited it from an uncle who in turn had been the basin's first successful American settler. Later there had been friction between Garrison and Clover but the lord of the territory had kept hands off the ranch for a long period of time, even though that legendary feud existed.

Then Cody Haight appeared—presently became Garrison's lieutenant and chief gunman; within a few weeks the news went around that there was trouble again in the Little Sonora—that Wolf Garrison was up to his old tricks! The Alvarez tribe was ousted from its quarter-section at the head of the Pomo; Pat Garrick left his hermit's cabin under the Kitten Hills; the Bridgers had their warning to decamp and the mild and inexperienced superintendent the Clovers had put on the Crazy Horse—Jasper, the bookkeeper from Chicago—began to lose cattle, horses and his regular sleep and to find it hard to keep riders or farm-hands even though he raised wages and set the best table in three counties. For this revival of the hard old customs of the vicinity Wolf Garrison got the

credit; only a few observed that it was Cody Haight who brought in and handled the new force of toughs and gunmen who rode Garrison horses and that, though he was seldom found leading these renegades, his fine and merciless hand and mind seemed to be behind everything they did.

In brief the Little Sonora, as the stage driver had told Alice Clover, had again got itself a bad name. Several stories were afoot: one that Wolf Garrison was dead and that Cody Haight had fallen heir to or had grabbed his holdings; one that Garrison was bed-ridden, perhaps from an old bullet-wound or just the meanness that had "struck in" on him; one that Garrison had lost his own nerve and had imported Haight to do his dirty work for him. But nobody knew because the hard men who rode under Haight were close-mouthed when sober and liars when drunk and because only a fool would have ridden in on Garrison's sprawling buildings beyond the Pomo to make a personal investigation. And fools of that sort were scarce in the neighborhood of the Little Sonora.

This, in effect, is what Brose Fallon learned, in the next few days, of the region that had looked good enough to him to stay in. Duke Mulvahill, watching him, said once:

"You don't believe there is a Wolf Garrison, yet, Brose!"

"Me?" Fallon studied. "I'm not clean sure. Mostly you all sound like a kid telling his mammy about a big bear he saw on the way home from school."

"You're young an' ig'rant!" Dan Bridger growled. "Fust time that b'ar swipes you acrost the flank you'll change your tune!"

This was not selling talk, considering that Brose Fallon was in the market; the best proof of his sincerity was that he went stubbornly ahead and made a deal with Bridger for his half-section of land, his fifteen or twenty head of feeders, ten breeding cows and a good young Hereford bull and what equipment had escaped the ravages of the fire. Fallon made a payment down and gave notes for the rest.

"I don't know whether I can pay them or not," he said, "but they're pretty, ain't they?"

"I'll be around somewheres close to collect," Bridger said, with the nearest he ever came to a smile.

DUKE MULVAHILL asked: "You ain't staying in the Little Sonora, are you?"

"Me? I sure am."

"Buying another place?" Brose asked, out of politeness.

"Stayin' on this hyar one. I'm goin' to work for you, Fallon."

"But I can't pay a hand! I'm giving Duke Mulvahill enough of a share so he won't leave me to make my own bed, but I'm not signing on any riders."

"Didn't reckon you was," Bridger replied, stonily. "I'm goin' to turn over this nine hundred you paid me to the missus, and her and the kids can double up with her sister's folks in Dorrance. The kids got to get some schoolin' anyhows."

There was a wail from Morrie. "I ain't a-goin' to no school—!" he began.

His father gave him a look. "You're goin' to do's your told, or you'll git the livin' daylights tanned out o' you!" He turned to Fallon. "I'm goin' to stay right hyar an' you can't help yourselves without you run me off with a gun. If you want to give me my grub, o. k. If you don't I'll buy my own." His voice rose. "I'm not movin' out of Little Sonora without havin' ary chanct at Wolf Garrison, you kin put that down!"

There was no talking him out of the project. Brose Fallon finally gave up.

"All right," he said, laughing, "you win! You and Duke Mulvahill can take turn about night-herdin' my seven cows and eleven feeders. If I get me another hand I'll have to put sheep on this place."

At daybreak on the following morning Bridger had his mismated mule team hooked up to a wagon that had escaped burning by the raiders through having been left in a meadow with grass hay half-loaded. The pitifully few belongings of the family that had been dragged from the house by Bridger and the boy before they were put on the run were thrown in; after a scant breakfast the homesteader and Fallon climbed to the crazy spring seat for the long drive to Dorrance to file the papers in the deal and get lumber for a shack and some supplies. Morrie tried to hide out; was caught and cuffed; was carried away, sulking, on a mattress in the bed of the

wagon. Duke Mulvahill was left to guard the place and to start repairs on a fence that had been torn down by the night visitors.

The clerk in the Recorders office at Dorrance glanced at the deed, made up for a small fee by a local notary, that Brose Fallon handed across the counter.

"Why, that's in the Little Sonora country, isn't it?" he inquired, after studying the description.

"That's what they call it," Brose said. "Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Only we don't get many property transfers from over that way, except—" But he stopped there, and Fallon had to guess what exception there might be to that general rule.

It was late in the afternoon before they were loaded: a jag of lumber, two kegs of nails, a 10 x 12 tent, a second-hand cook-stove, odds and ends that Bridger recommended, and a box of staple groceries. It was too late, in fact, to get far on their road, but they did drive out eight or ten miles; for it was to be a long pull for the mules with what they were now carrying. Bridger parted from his family after another row with Morrie, the boy, who hated the thought of town existence and school and who begged to be allowed to go back to the ranch. Mrs. Bridger, a shy, quiet-voiced woman, wished Brose Fallon luck. But she did it in the tones of one who would be surprised if her wish came true.

Missing Scando both ways by taking a short-cut leading into the Kitten Hills they made the ranch around four the next afternoon.

Duke Mulvahill gazed on the load with his mouth agape. "I didn't hear anything about you going to build a twelve-room house, Brose," he commented. "And don't a cook-stove come under the head of a luxury?"

"Oh, we're going to be all cluttered up with luxuries, Duke," Fallon replied. "I bought you a diamond tiara and me a dress-suit to wear every night for dinner. Lean on the lower part of that stove, will you, and let's get her set up to see if she smokes. Did you have any company?"

"I was looked over. Doc Lurie rode out of his way to take in the sights."

"Doc Lurie?"

"He was playin' cards in Potter's Barn when you busted into things," Mulvahill explained.

"Oh. He was the one that couldn't look you in the eye."

"He can't. Not exceptin' along a gun-barrel; he gets over his trouble then."

"What did he ride by for, did he say?"

"He kept out of range and didn't tell me. But he was near enough to figure me out—you can count on that."

BROSE laughed. "Well, with what Cody Haight has to tell him they'll know about as much as we do, then."

"And Wolf Garrison will."

"Put it that way. If you think Garrison will miss any details I might ride over and report progress."

"Suit yourself, you damn fool!" Duke said. Then he uttered an exclamation. "Where'd you buy this—and what for?" he asked. And dragged little Morrie Bridger out from under the tent.

"I ain't a-goin' back, pa!" the boy cried, before Duke had time to set him down, right side up. "You cain't make me. If you do I'll run away—"

Bridger, reaching for a neck-yoke, began to undo a strap.

"Wait a minute, Bridger!" Brose said, sharply. "Let's call a stock-holders' meeting on this business." He began to laugh. "Books I've read say that boys like that get to be President or live to make a million dollars! Don't lam the boy till we can talk things over!"

Bridger threw down the yoke. "Oh, all right!" he said. That difficult smile of his worked around his mouth. "I run away nine times when I was a kid to get to work for a horse-breaker; mebbe Morrie comes by it honest. He kin stay if you want him underfoot!"

Morrie let out a whoop—began feverishly to help with the unloading. Brose watched him, grinning.

"It looks like what I'd better do with this ranch is to lay out a town-site on it!" he said, half ruefully. "The rate the population grows don't you go and get yourself married, Duke Mulvahill; I just won't have it!"

Considering their circumstances they were a cheerful quartette for the next few days. Bridger proved invaluable, for neither Duke Mulvahill nor Fallon was much shakes as a carpenter and the older man and Morrie erected a cabin

that the two cowmen insisted on calling The Palace Hotel. With a load of willow poles brought from the Yellow Wash a *ramada* was built to shelter the horses; a load of grass hay was hauled in from the meadow where Bridger had cut it a week before; saddles, tack and supplies went into the tent, where Bridger and the boy made themselves beds; presently they were settled for the summer and fall, at least. And that, Duke Mulvahill observed, was probably as long as any of them would need to figure ahead.

Brose Fallon made light of that sort of pessimism, but he was not at all fooled by the silence from the northwest where lay Wolf Garrison's headquarters. It was, he realized, the lull before the storm that was inevitable. When and in what form it would strike was the question, but it was a waste of time to try and answer it. His was a waiting game, now. The mysterious Garrison — or perhaps Cody Haight had the next move!

Morrie, mounted on a wiry cayuse that Brose had ridden for him until the animal was partly gentled, brought the first news from outside. On the fourth morning his father remarked that it was mail-day and Morrie fought his fractious horse down to the county road where the Bridger mail-box hung on a post. He came back with a week-old Dorrance newspaper, a mail-order catalogue addressed to Miss Ethel Bridger and a fat envelope for B. J. Fallon, Esq., from the office of the County Recorder.

"Well, we're down on the books, anyway, Duke," Brose commented, as he ripped open the cover. "The next thing to get out is the articles of incorporation and the first dividend checks!"

"I see by the paper," Bridger interrupted, sententiously, "that the Crazy Horse has got itself some hands."

"What are you talking about?" Mulvahill demanded.

"Maybe I can't read. Try it on your piccolo."

He tossed the flimsy county journal across. Mulvahill picked it up—glanced down the column to the personal items Bridger had been scanning.

"Oh, that!" he said. And read aloud:

> C. Haight of the Little Sonora was in town yesterday. It seems he was over on business of his own and while he was in town hired some new hands for Crazy Horse, where Henry Jasper is superintendent. The men that went out were Sonny Gobey, J. Skillen and Charley Nickerson.

"Haight," Brose Fallon said, thoughtfully. "Yes, I might have figured that one."

"You might have figured Haight doing the hiring for the girl," Mulvahill said, harshly, "but you'd have a hell of a time figuring the *hombres* he picked."

Bridger laughed aloud. "Gobey!" he exclaimed. "I don't know the other two, but Sonny Gobey is poison to skunks, and coyotes wouldn't speak to him if they met him!"

Mulvahill nodded. "That's right. And I know Skillen and Squint Nickerson. Haight drew three of a kind!"

Fallon looked from one to the other of them. "You tell me something, but not enough," he remarked, mildly. "Are these three going to do Miss—to do the Crazy Horse any good?"

"It depends on what you mean by good," Mulvahill said, sourly. "They'd be a dead loss herding cows or branding calves or even sitting around in the shade making a pretty picture. But if the Crazy Horse wants anybody shot in the back—well, they'll earn their thirty-a-month-and-found and won't even care if they get it or not!"

CHAPTER VII

Two Riders Meet

BROSE FALLON threw a saddle on his hammer-headed horse and went for a ride.

If Duke Mulvahill or Bridger had asked him where he was going he wouldn't have been able to tell them: for once in his life he was wavering between impulse and judgment. But Alice Clover was in his mind—and very little else.

His own difficulties didn't worry him overly much. The menace of this Wolf Garrison was too shadowy to disturb him; he knew that Cody Haight was dangerous and his side-pardners—such men as Doc Lurie and the pock-marked Monk Stonehouse, whom he had seen on the porch of Goings' Hotel on the day

of his arrival, and as whatever pair it was that had burned Bridger out—were treacherous and would kill him with or without provocation if Haight ordered them to. But he was used to taking care of himself, even against men of this stripe. He had put his savings, carried into the Little Sonora in a money-belt, into the Bridger homestead, not only as an excuse for staying in the basin, but because he believed, once Garrison's crew of badmen was broken up and Garrison and Haight were cured of their habit of taking whatever they wanted, that the place would have the makings of a good ranch in it.

But the news that Haight had put on to the Crazy Horse three renegades such as Mulvahill and Bridger had named upset his calculations and made him more anxious than before for the safety of the girl for whose sake he had stopped at Scando in the first place. What he couldn't decide was whether to go across the hills and see her or to wait a little longer on events. At any rate he turned that way presently—took a winding trail that led him up the slopes of the Kitten Hills.

His horse brought him to the ridge. There, lounging in the saddle, he could look out and see the lay of this land. It was a glass-clear afternoon without a hint of haze in the atmosphere, and the brilliant sun gave the whole scene the third-dimension quality of a stereoscopic picture. Roughly kidney-shaped, the Little Sonora was seen as a basin, bounded north and south by mountains and a rolling plateaus, the Gray Wolf Hills in the distant west and behind him, well to the east, the cragged peaks of The Nusquallies. It was early enough in the summer so that much grass was still bright and green; late enough so that closely pastured hills and some patches on the floor had begun to turn a soft tan. A band of willows, boxelders and western laurel stretched southwest and northwest along the Poma and on such tributary creeks and streams as Cricket, Beasley's and the Cochise; roads that had been built by use instead of by surveys cut it into a crazy quilt pattern of fields and fenced range. Grazing cattle dotted the basin; he could see his own rude shack almost at his feet; off in the clear distance were the stone house, barns, corral fences of Wolf Garrison's headquarters, diminished to the proportions of children's toys on a playroom floor. A hawk wheeled overhead. Faintly one cowbell sent to his ears a broken rhythm of hollow, musical notes.

He and the horse heard at the same time the sound of a hoof striking a rock—of snapping twigs. Fallon turned slightly in the saddle—took off his hat.

"I was thinking about you, Miss Clover," he said.

The girl was mounted on a clumsy old mare that labored up the last sharp rise from the east; she sat in a McClellan army saddle, booted and in some sort of riding breeches Brose had never seen before; she wore a sweater that fitted closely her trim figure and a soft hat that looked as though it had been used for a door-mat yet which she gave an air by the mere fact of donning it. He saw again that she had square shoulders, a way of holding her head, curly hair more tossed than combed back, eyes that were troublesome to a man to look into and a mouth you would want to kiss if you didn't watch yourself! She pulled up the wind-broken old horse; there was no friendliness in her face.

"It would be better for all concerned," she said, "if you stopped thinking of me or my affairs! Why do you make them your business?"

"Oh, *business,* Miss Clover? Not business."

"You seem to have nothing better to do."

"That's where you're wrong." He waved a hand. "I've bought myself a brand. I'm running my own steers."

SHE shrugged. "I'm from the East and not very intelligent, perhaps—at least by your standards. But I'm not a fool."

"A man could put up an argument on that," Fallon said, looking her in the eyes.

She flushed. "That's it!" she exclaimed. "For some reason I don't understand you have taken it into your head to do my thinking for me." She laughed a little bitterly. "My family and friends, back home, called me a fool. But they have certain rights."

"Meaning I haven't any! Tally! I'm just an outsider; crowding in. But it isn't to do you any harm, Miss Clover."

Her voice was a little less harsh when

she said: "I know you mean well, Mr.—"

"Fallon. But I'm called Brose."

"Mr. Fallon," she continued, as though she had not heard the suggestion in his added phrase. "I'm sure you want to help me. I don't happen to want your help. Is that clear?"

"That's clear. But it isn't clear that you don't *need* it. And I'm staying here till you see that."

She colored again; again spoke sharply.

"That will be a long time. I want to be fair to you. I heard several days ago that you are buying Mr. Bridger's ranch. I thought it was just talk."

"I don't talk that way," Fallon said. "Fact is I usually say pretty close to what I mean. Like now, for instance."

"Give me credit for doing the same," she cried. "I'll pay you what you've paid for the Bridger place. I'll pay you a profit, if you want it. The Crazy Horse ranch could use the land."

He was puzzled. "You don't mean you'd go that far to get me to leave?" he inquired, slowly.

"Yes."

"I can't figure that proposition out. I won't bother you. You won't even know I'm here—till you want to."

"You won't leave?"

"Why, no."

She cried to him, fiercely: "Don't you know that you can't stay? That you won't be allowed to stay? You saw what happened to the Bridgers!"

"Oh, that!" He laughed. "But I'm not Bridger."

"You think you're a better man than he! You think you can fight for your rights and hold them." She shook her head. "It's you that's playing the fool, Mr. Fallon."

"Maybe." He began idly braiding and unbraiding the three thongs of his quirt lash. He did not look at her. "This man Cody Haight has been filling you full of fairy stories—is that it?"

"We'll leave Mr. Haight out of this."

"Oh, no, we won't! Because he wished himself into it. So did I. You happen to like him and you happen to not like me. That's fair enough. But when I hear you tell what Haight says is going to happen to me if I don't sift out of the basin I've got to tell you what's going to happen to the men that try it." He glanced at her. "They may get me—I know that!—but somebody is going to get hurt bad doing it."

"But when there's another way—so simple! Your staying only makes it certain that there'll be blood-shed—killing!"

"There can be worse things than killing, Miss Clover. Think about that!"

"Some nonsense about honor, I suppose! Men might call you a coward if you left! Is that it?"

Brose laughed. "Lord, you don't suppose I've ever thought of that, do you?" Sobering then he went on: "I've heard you've put on some new hands at the Crazy Horse."

"Well?"

He studied a minute. Then he said: "Let it go! The long and short of it is—I'm staying here."

"I suppose I can't do anything to change your mind. I wouldn't try—I wouldn't care—if I didn't know you were so stubborn only because you think you are doing something for me. And what you must understand is that I don't want you to do that!" She waited, but he only looked at her, sitting quietly and easily in his saddle. "What did you mean a minute ago about the new men we—Mr. Jasper has hired?"

"I back-trailed on that one, Miss Clover. I don't know the men around these parts."

"You're stubborn about that, too!"

"I guess maybe I am." He hesitated, then added: "I'll say this much: You're playing somebody else's cards, without knowing it. Playing them right along and some day you'll see it." He shrugged, aware that they weren't speaking the same language. "Let it all go, now. You can just tell Cody Haight for me that I'm seeing his bet and raising him. He'll savvy what that means."

"In other words, you're going to persist in this idiotic quarrel?"

"Maybe that's the word for it."

"Then I'm through trying to do anything for you."

SHE tugged at the reins and brought the old horse around. In making the turn on the narrow trail the mare blundered into Fallon and he caught the girl's hand to steady her.

"I'm much obliged to you for trying, Alice," he said.

She made an effort to wrench free, her face flaming. "I let it pass the first time you did that—called me by my name! Let me go! I—I hate you!"

"I'm hoping to make you get over that." He smiled into her eyes.

She seemed to take a sudden resolution. "I don't know why I bother myself about you this way," she cried. "I shan't again. But I was riding to find you."

"You mean, now?"

"Yes. Some riders are coming your way tonight — to drive you out of the basin." Her voice broke. "I don't want you killed — anybody killed. I don't want this fighting to go on. So I've warned you!"

Brose Fallon kept her hand in his. "Why, that's mighty kind of you!" he exclaimed. "And now—it's too late for you ever to stop me loving you!"

She stared at him — gasped — raised her riding whip. She struck at him with it, pulled free and sent the clumsy mare plunging down the trail toward the Crazy Horse.

Brose Fallon watched her go, a smile playing about his lips but his eyes grave.

"Some day," he said, aloud, "you'll know why you rode to bring me that word, Alice. But I just hope you find out before things get bad—for you!"

CHAPTER VIII

The Raiders

FALLON'S strategy was decided on before he reached the shack; Bridger was doubtful that it would succeed, but Duke Mulvahill approved.

"Morrie," Fallon said, to the boy, "you get on your pony and clear out. This isn't going to be a boy's game."

But the fourteen-year-old raised a shrill protest. "I got a right to take a poke at them varmints!" he cried. "An' I kin tote paw's shot-gun!"

Bridger's clouded face was thoughtful. "He's always been that way, since we come here, Fallon," he said. "An' if we're a-goin' to stay and be any good to you, might as well let him get his hand in."

"All right, if you say so, Bridger. Bring along your shotgun, Morrie—and keep both hammers cocked!"

There were eight horsemen in the group that, in the late twilight, came in at a run and spread themselves out around the partly finished cabin. The man whom Fallon had first seen playing cards in Potter's livery stable office in Scando—Doc Lurie—rode almost into the half opened door. Smoke rose from the sod chimney that stuck through the unshingled roof and the brilliant white light of a gasoline lantern blazed from within. The home-folks heard Lurie call sharply: "Come out of it, you!"

Receiving no reply he pushed the door wide with the muzzle of his long revolver.

"Why, there ain't anybody here!" he exclaimed.

Cody Haight's careless laugh rose. "They're likely under the bunks!" he sneered. "A couple of you go in and pull them out by the heels!"

A Mexican and a squat, burly man slid to the ground and, with guns held ready, went inside. Doc Lurie and Haight backed their horses a few steps; the ring of waiting men stood fast, right hands at their weapons. The two investigators came out again.

"Must a-took to the hills, Cody!" the squat man called. "Ain't hide ner hair or nobody hyar!"

"That's too bad," Haight said, with real regret. "But you've got a match, haven't you, Monk?"

"Wait till I find out where at they keep their coal oil. That'll make it look purtier!"

As though this jeering remark had been a signal Brose Fallon's voice, somewhere behind the raiders, cut the night.

"Put 'em up!" he said. And, distinctly: "If you don't, Haight's a dead man!"

The visitors swung about. Indistinct in the surrounding shadows and keeping well out of the single path of light that came from the open door of the cabin, they saw figures. They were surrounded —flanked—ambushed!

Cody Haight, insolent, cool, bold, laughed again.

"Don't mind me, boys!" he said, to his followers. "If you can see anything, shoot at it!"

But no one shot; all their hands went up just a trifle.

"You've come to the wrong place, Haight!" Fallon went on, as though there had been no interruption. "If you can get that through your head—and through this man Garrison's head!—you can ride the way you came as far as we're concerned."

"We?" Cody challenged, in his lazy tones. "I don't seem to get that 'we.' Is this some kind of a company or something like that?"

"Call it 'me,' then!" Brose snapped. "Brose Fallon. And if you don't remember the name—"

"I remember the name," Haight said, impudently. "It's the name of a smart-Alec that thought he could put it over on a lady by crowding in on her business without being asked!"

There was a moment's tense silence. It was Duke Mulvahill who broke in on it.

"Maybe you don't know it, Haight," he said, "but till you get what's coming to you you'll never be closer to it than you are right now."

IN the darkness Brose Fallon shook himself slightly—spoke in a changed voice.

"Thank's, Duke!" he said. "I'd give even a rattlesnake a chance, but I was on the edge of forgetting it till you reminded me." He laughed. "As far as you go, Haight, you and I'll settle things between us when the time comes. Right now I want to tell you something to carry back to this man they frighten children with in the Little Sonora—the man I guess is too big or too busy or too scared to do his own dirty work—the one they call Wolf Garrison."

Haight answered, as cold and insolent as ever. "Not too big or too busy and not scared at all, Fallon. You see, you aren't important enough for him to know anything about."

"All right. But when he hears about me, if he does, tell him that if he gets me out of this country it'll be in a pine box—and I'll take plenty of company along! And next time you or Garrison gangs up on us here—"

He was interrupted by the sudden, violent plunging of a horse belonging to one of the visitors, that reared, slewed sidewise and blundered into a second. A man cried out, tumbled to the ground and began to run for the tent which stood thirty paces off. Bridger and the boy—even Duke Mulvahill—swung that way.

Fallon was the only one of them who was not caught by the trick. He was watching Doc Lurie and Haight—saw them snatch at their weapons. His two guns barked together. Doc Lurie reeled in the saddle, caught himself. Cody Haight's horse had tossed his head high and for the second time a bullet of Fallon's addressed to his enemy failed to reach the addressee. The horse dropped to its knees—pitched sidewise. Haight kicked himself clear, ducking, ran behind Lurie's horse, vaulted up behind the injured man and steadied the fainting rider while taking control of his mount. At the same instant the boy, Morrie Bridger, let go both barrels of his shot-gun in the direction of the man who was still running for the tent. The roar of this unusual arm was the only thing needed to stampede the raiders' horses; one of them broke and ran—another followed, taking with it the mount of the man who was now at the tent. Haight called a command and the whole party turned tail.

Morrie Bridger screamed: "Paw! Look! The tent! Git that feller—!"

The unmounted man who had created the first diversion was now running again; Fallon made out that he came alongside his horse, which had been caught by a companion, made a flying vault into the saddle and disappeared with the rest into the night. At the same time slow tongues of flame began to climb the side-wall of the tent. Bridger and the boy ran that way, Bridger jerking off his coat as he went.

Duke Mulvahill called: "Brose! You all right?"

The answer was flat—that of a man who isn't interested in the subject. "I'm all right! But seems like I'm wasting an awful lot of ammunition lately!"

Mulvahill exploded blasphemously. "Then why didn't you let me get Haight?" he demanded.

Fallon had crossed to him and they both walked toward the lighted cabin while Bridger and his son beat out the fire at the tent. Mulvahill saw that Brose looked weary and dejected. He repeated his question. "It would've saved trouble—and he sure has it coming!"

"Maybe," Brose said. "But right now there's a lady thinks she needs him left alive. And when she finds out her mistake, I want him myself!"

CHAPTER IX

Ferry Bowles Makes a Discovery

THE man Brose Fallon had said was needed, or thought to be, leaned negligently against the high stone fireplace in the Crazy Horse headquarters living room, looking down on the lady Fallon had referred to in the same judgment. She had sent for him earlier in the evening, but had been told that he had ridden away from the ranch about sundown. It was eight now; she had come in to find Haight lounging there, at ease and, as usual, smiling at her faintly with a familiar impudence that was almost insulting. She tried to make her greeting of him casual.

"The boys said you wanted to see me, Miss Alice," he said. "I'm sorry I wasn't around."

"Where were you?"

He looked surprised. "Why, I didn't have any idea I had to be any one place," he said. "Maybe I'm wrong!"

"You are just putting me off. You rode with Garrison's men against Mr. Fallon."

"Oh! Somebody's been talking, then."

"No one has been talking. You practically told me yourself about the—plan. I asked you not to go."

He held her eyes as he challenged her. "You just said that you knew there was a play coming up over there. Fallon got wind of it. So he won the jack-pot."

In spite of herself she colored. "You mean," she said, hastily, "that you were driven away? That Mr. Fallon held you off?"

"He'd been warned ahead. So he bush-wacked us."

"Was—anyone hurt?"

"Doc Lurie. And I left my horse, right there in their front yard, you might say."

"How about Mr. Fallon?"

"You don't need to worry about him. Not for now."

Abruptly she said: "I was the one who warned him tonight."

"Yes," he said, almost carelessly. "I figured that out."

"I did it because I can't bear—"

"Yes. I know."

"But you don't know!" she interrupted, impatiently. "This Mr. Fallon wants to help me. He thinks I'm in some sort of danger here. I don't want his help—or his protection—but I don't want to see him killed in cold blood!"

"The trouble is, Miss Clover, that you don't understand about things here in this basin. It isn't big enough for three spreads—cow outfits. And Fallon doesn't savvy that either—yet!"

She looked into the old fire on the hearth. "What will happen next?" she inquired, after a moment.

"Happen? I don't know."

"You mean that you haven't had your orders yet—from this man Garrison?"

"Orders? Nobody gives me orders."

"You say I don't understand things here, Cody Haight. Certainly you don't do anything to help me understand." She made a gesture of baffled impatience. "I'm helpless and ignorant and an outsider!" She laughed bitterly. "That foreman who quit—Mulvahill, was his name?"

"Duke Mulvahill, he calls himself."

"Probably he was right. He said that if I couldn't operate the Crazy Horse any better than poor old Howard Jasper had it wouldn't be worth a dollar, Mexican, in a year; that if I couldn't pick between men any better than I had—"

"You getting tired of your pick, Miss Alice?" He reached to a chair, swung his wide hat up, cocked it. "I'll be dusting, if you—"

"Oh, don't be so dramatic! I've told you before that I haven't anybody to depend on but you. If you let me down probably Mulvahill will prove he was right."

"Duke Mulvahill runs to talk," Haight said, carelessly. "There's nothing wrong with the Crazy Horse except poor managment. You had to admit old Mr. Jasper wasn't cut out to breed and run beef."

"But this big man of yours—this Wolf Garrison? Hadn't he really sent word that the Crazy Horse had better move out of Little Sonora?"

"Oh, I guess not. You see, Miss Alice, Garrison owns a lot of this basin and he's been here so long he sort of thinks he owns it all. And he knows and I know and you ought to know that outfits like Gaffy Hoar's and Bridger's and those can't make salt for their beans here."

"Nor the Crazy Horse?"

"The Crazy Horse can make expenses and a little better. Not any fortune." He shifted his position slightly, still leaning carelessly against the fireplace front. "It could turn into a good spread if you had more range and the stock to graze it."

"We'd better be satisfied with what we have—the land, I mean—till we can keep what stock we own. Mr. Jasper may not be a rancher, but he can add a column of figures. And the Crazy Horse has lost more than two hundred cattle in the last three years."

"That's bad! You're pretty sure of that, are you?"

"You'd never admit," she said, "that your friend Mr. Garrison had—well, tried to damage the Crazy Horse so as to discourage me and my family!"

"I can't admit something I don't know about, you see."

"But you've been his right-hand man! You're his friend."

"Friend? I don't think so. The way it seems to me, Wolf Garrison doesn't have any friends—or need any."

"He must be quite a man!"

"He is quite a man, in his way." He made her look at him. "He's a man I'd hate to have you in the hands of; I'll say that much."

SHE laughed. "Are you trying to frighten me? Because, if you are, you can't do it. In the first place I'm not easily frightened, and in the second place I don't propose to find myself in the hands of Wolf Garrison—or any other man!"

He smiled down at her. "Does that rule us all out?"

"You're getting personal again," she said, coloring slightly. "And I told you that wouldn't do."

"I'm sorry."

"No, you're not sorry! You're too bold and sure of yourself ever to be sorry for anything you do, Cody Haight. What you mean is that you won't be personal—for a few minutes, anyway."

"Well, I'm sure trying, Miss Alice," he replied, half mocking, half grave. "But it's a new saddle for me to sit and I haven't wore down into it yet."

"Let's change the subject. At least, let's go back to where we were. You don't admit that Garrison has been stealing Crazy Horse stock?"

"I told you the answer to that one:—I don't know anything about it."

The outer door opened abruptly and fat Ferry Bowles, the cowboy, came to a stop in it. He was covered with dust and at some time earlier perspiration had streaked his face so that is presented a comic appearance of woe. He pushed his hat back—hesitated.

"Looks like I come to the wrong meetin'-house," he said. "I was aimin' to find Mr. Jasper."

"Mr. Jasper has probably gone to bed, Bowles," the girl said. "What did you want to see him about?"

The stout cowman shuffled his feet and looked at the floor. "Why, I—I guess what I got kin wait." He chuckled. "Reminds me of the time my Uncle Clarence went to a widow's to ask her to marry him an' there was two widows there. An' I'm dummed if—"

Alice Clover laughed. "Never mind your uncles, Ferry! You haven't been to Mr. Fallon's, have you?"

"Who, me? No'm. I heard some shootin' down there some time back, when I was up in the Kittens. But I guess it was the boys celebratin' a birthday or s'uthin'."

Cody Haight struck in. "What were you doing up in the Kittens, Bowles?" he demanded, brusquely. "Miss Clover told you this morning to ride the east-line fence."

"Hell, I rode the east line fence—" He stopped and even through the dust his blush showed. "Excuse me, Miss Clover. But I rode that fence clean around the south boundary and back up this way on our west lines. An' I found it wasn't holdin' them feeders that was in there. So I started lookin' for 'em."

"Where were they?" the girl asked.

"They weren't."

Haight spoke up again. "All right, Bowles. Go get yourself a snack from the kitchen and turn in. I'll talk to you in the morning."

"Wait a minute!" Alice Clover's

voice was quiet but firm. "I'd like to understand about this—tonight." She turned to the abashed cowboy. "You mean the cattle weren't on that range at all?"

"Nary one of 'em!"

"But—they were there the day I rode out to see the ranch the day after I got here! About two hundred of them."

"Yes'm."

"Don't be stupid, Bowles!" she snapped. "You're holding back something. What is it?"

Although he tried not to do so Ferry Bowles looked at Cody Haight—looked away again hastily. The girl saw the look.

"It's all right," she said, reassuringly. "You can speak out. Mr. Haight is my friend."

"Oh, he is, eh? I mean—sure! Yes. O. K. Well, I got kind of int'rested in them feeders myself, if you want to know. So I trailed 'em—to the mouth of the old Water-Hole Canyon—an' then I found out where the feeders went."

The girl puzzled—turned to Haight. "Do you know the place he is speaking of, Mr. Haight?"

"Yes, I know. And Bowles is mixed up somehow. Those feeders are around."

"You're damn' well right they're around!" Ferry Bowles exploded. "But not on Crazy Horse range. Because the old water hole has been opened up there, to toll 'em down to drink—an' then a easy wide trail has been cut—an' cut lately, too—so when the steers leave the water they don't come back home up the steep bank again. They foller that new trail up through a break in our fence and head west—on to Wolf Garrison's range!"

CHAPTER X

The Wolf's Den

At a flat-topped desk lighted by a student-lamp with a green shade a man sat in an oddly-shaped chair reading an old letter, in a woman's handwriting, that was one of a small packet he had taken an hour before from a safe nearby. Occasionally he glanced up to examine a photograph that he had brought out with the package of letters and that now stood on the desk in its silver frame; a straight, dark, proud young woman, in a dress with a high collar and what used to be called "leg-of-mutton" sleeves looked back at him, with a level, appraising glance, though a half-smile played around the lovely lips. He put down a letter; he spoke to the pictured lady thoughtfully.

"I wonder if she looks like you, Mary," he said, musing.

Seated as he was only the upper part of his body was revealed; it was the torso of a very large, powerful man, with a face that showed strength and the ability to command men and to shape events. Probably sixty years old he was still handsome, with iron-gray hair and dark eyes deep-set and keen. His chin was strong and his mouth could be hard, though now it was softened as he seemed to go back in memory to other days.

He reached out for another old letter from the packet then he paused suddenly, turning his head to listen.

Outside rose the sound of horses' hooves coming in at a hard gallop; then he heard a man call out sharply:

"Get Dummy Joe and some hot water!"

Another voice said: "Somebody tell the boss."

"Who's there?" he called, in a curt, resonant voice. "Lurie! Stonehouse!"

The pock-marked man Brose Fallon had first seen on the steps of Goings' Hotel in Scando appeared in an outer door.

"It's Monk, Mr. Garrison. Doc Lurie got himself shot up."

"Who shot him?"

"Why—er—well—you see—!"

Wolf Garrison's words cut like cold steel. "Talk, Stonehouse, or else get out and send somebody who can."

"It was this new fellow—this Fallon."

"What was Doc Lurie doing—but let it go now. Is he badly hurt?"

"We don't know. Cody—that is, we thought we'd better tote him here."

"Tell them to bring him in."

"All right, boss!" Stonehouse turned—called into the darkness.

In a moment or two Doc Lurie, groaning, was carried into the room and placed on a worn leather couch at one side. Garrison deftly steered himself that way—leaned from his chair to make a quick,

knowing examination.

"Send Dummy Joe here! You and Chavez get his vest and shirt off, Stonehouse. And the rest of you mavericks drift!"

They jumped at his orders. Presently the wounded man opened his eyes—groaned.

"Am I hurt bad, Mr. Garrison?"

"Probably not bad enough! Who was with you when you got hurt?"

Lurie turned sulky. "I ain't sure. It was dark and—"

Wolf Garrison leaned over and slapped the man across the face, hard. But he did not raise his voice nor change his tone when he said: "Answer my question!"

"I—I am. We was all of us in on it. With Cody headin' out."

"Where is Haight?"

"I don't—"

Garrison lifted a hand and Lurie put an arm across his face and cried out protestingly.

"I'm giving you the straight of it, Mr. Garrison!" he said. "Cody's horse got shot out from under him an' he rode off from Fallon's double with me. Out a ways he took Navvy Pete's horse and Navvy come on with me."

"What happened to this new man—this Fallon?"

"Nothin'!"

GARRISON laughed aloud. "Cody Haight seems to have bit off all he can chew with this stranger!" he observed. "All right, Stonehouse, you and Chavez turn Lurie over. Fold his shirt and put it under him—I don't want the pig bleeding all over my couch!"

A gaunt man, with an egg-shaped head cocked on one side in peculiar fashion, came in with a kitchen pail full of hot water, a fragment of cotton cloth and a small sponge. Garrison, without looking at him, gestured for him to set the water down. In a loud, discordant voice, difficult to understand, the man mouthed out:

"Hurt bad?"

Garrison pointed, looking up at him. "Chest. Too high to kill him."

The man watched Garrison's lips and it was apparent at once that he was totally deaf—that he got the message by lip-reading. He gave a peculiar, throaty laugh. "Too bad!" he said. No one stopped to wonder whether he was sorry for Lurie or was regretful that the wound was not a fatal one. He moved deftly, with long, white hands; in a few minutes he had cleaned and bandaged the high chest injury, paying no heed to the patient's grimaces of pain—not hearing his groans.

"All right," Wolf Garrison said, "take him into the south bedroom. He'll sleep it off."

Monk Stonehouse and the Mexican started out, carrying the injured man between them. Garrison said, curtly:

"I want to see Cody Haight when he rides in."

"Maybe Codee don' ride een, *jefe!*" Chavez volunteered. "I theenk she's go to the Crasee 'orse."

"I want to see him when he rides in!" Garrison repeated, a little more sharply.

"Oh, *si!*"

"We'll sure tell him, boss!"

Dummy Joe, who was cook for the outfit and general handy man to its owner, gathered up his make-shift surgical equipment.

"Want to turn in?" he asked, thickly.

Garrison shook his head and waved a hand in dismissal.

"You can call me!"

"Yes."

Left alone the big man wheeled his chair about and with two or three movements of powerful wrists and hands propelled himself back to the desk. For a while he sat there thinking; finally he picked up the letters and dropped them and the silver-framed picture into a wide, shallow drawer in the front of the desk. They fell on top of a heavy revolver there; noticing this Garrison lifted them so that he could get the gun out and put it on top of them. Ever since the fall from a horse that had crippled him he had kept that weapon there, ready to his hand; every one on the place knew it was there, which may have been one of the reasons why it had never been called into service. For, tied as he was to a chair, Wolf Garrison was still lightning fast with a gun, as he was with decisions and orders to his dangerous crew. Always a dominant personality the overlord of the Little Sonora was more feared now by those around him than he had been when he was whole and active. By all those around him except, perhaps, Cody Haight!

If any feeling of Cody Haight toward him concerned Wolf Garrison no one knew nor could have found out. Haight had shown up a year or so back and become one of Garrison's riders; presently he was Garrison's lieutenant and favorite—as nearly his friend as any man could be. The slick, cool, daring, impudent younger man took orders for some months but gradually he began to exercise more and more authority. How much of this was given him explicitly by Wolf Garrison and how much he assumed, in his confident fashion, was problematical, for no one ever knew what passed between the two in that big room where Garrison spent most of his waking hours. Certainly Garrison activities had become more aggressive under Haight's hand; Garrison was given credit or blame for these, no matter which of the two was the actual instigator.

Now, as he waited at his desk, Wolf Garrison showed no sign of his feelings or thoughts. His mouth was harder than it had been while he was reading those old letters, otherwise he was unchanged. He sat passive, patient, and if he was a little sinister in his vigil it was only because he seemed so sure of himself and so ready to keep that vigil indefinitely, as implacable and as unchangeable as Fate.

An old clock on the mantel over the fireplace struck ten—eleven—midnight. Then a horse came in, at a long gallop, and went on past the house toward the barns. The minutes passed; Cody Haight appeared in the outer door.

"Are you waiting for me?" he asked, in his level, steady voice. He lounged against the door frame, rolling a cigarette swiftly, lighting it, flicking the match stick to the floor.

"What are you bothering this new man about?" Garrison asked the question without turning from his desk and without looking at Haight.

"Just to see him jump," Haight answered, carelessly.

"He doesn't jump very high, from what I hear."

"He'll learn to."

"Or maybe you will."

HAIGHT laughed insolently. "Me? I'm no jumper."

"Doc Lurie isn't either, it seems."

"Has Lurie been bringing his troubles to you?" Haight's voice had a snarl in it.

Garrison waved a hand slightly. "He bloodied up my sofa there tonight. Dummy Joe patched him up and the boys put him to bed in the south room."

"I hope he dies of it!"

For the first time Garrison swung about. His mouth was set now in a hard line. "You're playing some game of your own lately, Cody!" he said. He did not raise his voice but he made it more brittle. "What is it?"

In spite of himself Haight was thrown off balance by this abrupt challenge. "I don't know what you're talking about, chief!"

"Oh, yes you do. And you know you're disobeying orders, too. I waited up tonight to see you. This is a showdown."

Haight recovered his self control. He crossed toward the desk, kicked a chair around and sat down on it astride, leaning his arms on the railed back. "That's all right with me. You want to see my hand—is that it?"

"You haven't got any hand. Unless you've picked one up from my discards?"

Haight laughed a little. He had begun to study Garrison closely and it was plain that he had come to some quick decision.

"I've got a better hand than you think, Garrison," he said. "And I don't play from any man's discard!"

His insolence was so plain that Garrison looked at him for a moment before speaking again. When he did it was coldly enough to have checked most hearers.

"I've been watching you the last two or three weeks, and I've had an idea you were getting a swelled head. You seem to have got a new idea that there's room for two of us in the Little Sonora."

"There might me, at that," Haight said, mildly.

"That's where you're wrong. There's only room for one."

"Oh. Well, if that's right—"

"You think you can be that one?" Garrison interrupted.

"I didn't say that." Some of Haight's brusqueness disappeared. It wasn't as easy as he had thought it would be to outface that crippled giant. He had

heard plenty of tales about Wolf Garrison's past and he was conscious now of the loaded and hair-spring-triggered revolver that lay in the drawer, slightly open, under the owner's hand. "Somebody's been running to you with stories, chief," he said, more mildly than he had yet spoken. "I can't tell you the facts till I know what those stories are."

"You can answer straight questions."

"Sure. And answer them as straight as they're asked, too!"

"What's your sudden interest in the Crazy Horse?"

Haight flushed. "What lying skunk has brought you that one? I—I haven't got any interest in the Crazy Horse."

"You're a liar, then, as well as swell-headed."

"You can't talk that way to—"

"Sit down!" Garrison's hand opened and shut on his desk, inches from that concealed gun. "Haight," he said, in a voice that was more venomous and deadly because it was so quiet; "you can't marry that Clover girl. You aren't fit to walk the same ground she does."

"The Clover girl?" Haight was taken completely off his guard. He stammered like a school-boy. "Why—I—Where—?"

"And I can tell you something else. This new man, Fallon, will see that you don't get too close to her. He didn't take on Bridger's place to start his own brand; he took it on to be around handy."

Haight took refuge in surliness.

"You seem to know everything. You don't know me."

Wolf Garrison laughed and it was not a pleasant sound. "I know you, Haight, backwards and forwards!" He leaned in a little, his eyes boring into the younger man's, who couldn't look away. "I've given you quite a lot of rope—maybe too much. But you'll hang yourself with it before you get through." He raised his voice for the first time. "Now get out of here!" he snapped. "I'll decide what to do with you—or to you—later!"

CHAPTER XI

The Plot Is Hatched

CODY HAIGHT tried to assume his familiar swagger as he swung up his big hat and walked out of Wolf Garrison's living room. But the swagger didn't jell. He was startled by the amount of information this chair-tied cripple had; he was surprised and a little scared by the unexpected vigor and strength of the man he had grown to despise for an invalided weakling. And because he was frightened he was angry and it was no task to whip that anger into rage. He went to the horse barn, without knowing what he would do next.

For the time being he did nothing. In the long, odorous alley behind the stalls he sat on an up-turned box, trying to collect himself and his thoughts. They were a jumble. In three minutes Wolf Garrison had upset all his calculations and made a wreck of his half-formed and rather vague plans. It was some time before he could get his bearings.

A year and a half before, running away from trouble in his own territory, Cody Haight had stumbled on the Little Sonora, seeing immediately that it was exactly suited both to his needs and his abilities. All the Wolf Garrison legends heightened his interest and strengthened his belief that he could become somebody here and do it safely. It had been ridiculously easy for him to accomplish his first purpose and get in with Garrison. In a few weeks he was a sort of foreman; in a few months he was virtually running things.

Presently he had begun to reach out, quietly and secretly, laying hazy plans for getting possession of the Little Sonora for himself. There was no hurry. Garrison was through—tied to a chair and impotent to do more than give orders. He must die one day and when he did, if he didn't leave the basin to Haight, the latter figured that he could seize it from the person to whom it was left. He had begun to think lightly of Garrison; their only difference of opinion had come when Haight had hired three renegades he knew and Garrison had kicked them off the place. But this set-

back Haight passed over; he kept the trio, Gobey, Jim Skillen, Squint Nickerson, at hand ready; now, sure enough, they were just where they could do him the most good—on the payroll of the Crazy Horse!

Meantime Alice Clover had come. Haight's first thought had been that he was strong enough to take her by persuasion or by force; presently he had found that he would have to win her. But it had never occurred to him—did not now—that he could fail. With her he would come into possession of the Crazy Horse, which he had been bleeding, against Garrison's orders, for months, until it was little more than a shell. A few hours before fat Ferry Bowles had blundered in with his tale of one of the methods Haight was secretly using, but before he rode away from the Crazy Horse after that revelation Haight had left orders with Jim Skillen that would take plenty of care of the fat and mouthy cowboy. Ferry Bowles wouldn't do any more spying for some time to come when Skillen and Company got through with him!

Yes, he could have handled such dumb roosters as Ferry Bowles, as he had handled the Alvarez tribe, old Pat Garrick, the homesteader hermit, and the Bridgers. Brose Fallon, to be sure, had checkmated him so far, but that couldn't last. The bullet from a high-powered rifle held down in safe ambush by a crack shot like Navvy Pete or Sonny Gobey and the cocky newcomer would be out of the picture!

But here, suddenly and unexpectedly, Wolf Garrison had turned nasty! The last difficulty Haight had ever expected had been from that source. What had got into the crippled man? Garrison wasn't blowing the roof off because of Haight's feud with Fallon, or because he had constructed a drift-trap to toll off a few Crazy Horse steers. It had something to do with Haight's attentions to Alice Clover. But what?

Angry, surprised, baffled, Haight began to hate Wolf Garrison with all the black malignity of which he was capable. Wolf Garrison! Brose Fallon! The girl!

Slowly a pattern began to arrange itself in his mind. Garrison himself had roughed in the elements of that pattern when he had said that Haight wasn't fit for the girl and that Fallon would stand between them. How much Garrison knew of Alice Clover or how he had come to know of her at all Haight couldn't understand. But it didn't matter. Already he himself had taken advantage of her fear of Garrison and her hatred of his notorious record to make her think of the Wolf as a monster, to be dreaded and shunned. If she could be further terrorized, as she could be—

A new idea occurred to the man; a cruel smile twisted his handsome face. Brose Fallon would protect her from Haight, would he? Why not, then, from Garrison? And if the Wolf could be made to appear in a worse light than before, both to Alice Clover and to her self-appointed champion—!

HAIGHT sat back for a minute, studying this new notion. Presently he rose, left the barn by a side-door and crossed to the bunkhouse, where he was greeted by a chorus of discordant snores. He did not make a light, but felt his way to the bunk occupied by Monk Stonehouse. The latter wakened instantly.

"Who is it?"

"Shut up, Monk! It's Cody Haight. I've got to make a ride tonight and I want you to straw-boss for me."

"All right." The man yawned heavily. "What's the lay?"

"Garrison is worrying about those feeders that have drifted over from the Crazy Horse through that gap you and Navvy Pete made in the line fence."

"He is, is he?"

"He isn't supposed to know about them, you understand."

Stonehouse grunted. "So we have to cover up for him—is that it?"

"That's it. In the morning we want everybody but you and Chavez to ride that way and haze the critters into the Yellow Wash—lose them there till we can ship."

"All right. What does me and Chavez do, stay home and make butter?"

"I'm using you. I want you at the north end of the Kittens at eight o'clock in the morning. Where the old Indian trail goes over the saddle."

"What the nation we going to—"

"You heard me. You and Chavez, understand. The rest of the boys to the wash." Haight paused, then added: "Here's another thing, Monk!"

"What is?"

"I won't be here, as I told you. If Garrison gives you or any of the boys orders in the morning, everybody say, yes, sir, and then go on doing what I've told you. Do you make that?"

"I'm damned if I do! If the boss gives us orders—"

"Blazes, you're dumb, Monk! Mr. Garrison doesn't want to know anything about those Crazy Horse steers, I told you. So he might give orders just to keep himself in the clear. See how I mean now?"

"Oh! Yes! Yes, I see. And the same goes for Chavez and me?"

"That's right." Haight's voice chilled. "Don't get this business mixed up, now, Monk!"

"I won't! I'll take care of things, Cody. And Chavez and me'll be where you said at eight. That right?"

"That's right."

"What time is it now?"

"Around one."

"A'mighty! And you ridin' off yet tonight? Well, every man to his own idears!"

In three seconds Stonehouse was snoring again.

Haight, knowing how completely he could trust Stonehouse, went back to the barn, picked a fresh horse, saddled him and tied him just inside the barn-door with a running-loop tie that could be instantly freed with one jerk. Then he sat down on his box again and took off his spurs and his boots.

In stocking-feet he went toward the house—made certain that its lights were all extinguished.

Stealthily he crossed to a side porch, stepped up on to it, went to a big window that looked into the living room. Embers glowed dully in the fireplace, but otherwise it was dark inside. As he expected he found the window was open. He climbed over the low sill, stopped to listen—went swiftly and silently across to Wolf Garrison's big desk.

A deeply charred log broke in the fireplace, sending up a little cloud of sparks; and tongues of flame sprang up, throwing their light out so that Haight could see fairly well. With the greatest caution he opened the wide, shallow drawer in the front of the desk. Garrison's famous revolver was there; it was the work of a moment only for the prowler to break the weapon and catch the six long, heavy cartridges the ejector forced out.

He dropped them into his pocket with one hand while he returned the empty gun with the other.

LETTERS and a picture in a silver frame caught his eye; the firelight lifted enough so that the face in that frame jumped out to Haight's eyes. He stared, startled and amazed.

Alice Clover's face!

He picked it up and a letter-sheet came with it.

In the light from the fire he saw that it was in the hand-writing of a woman. A paragraph at the bottom photographed itself on his mind.

> You have been very kind to me, dear, and I'll always be grateful. But I love Howard Clover and I must follow my heart and go with him. Please forget everything except that I was and always will be your friend.
>
> Mary Chichester.

In a flash Haight saw the whole story, complete and finished as though he had heard it from beginning to end.

Once Wolf Garrison and the Crazy Horse owner had been friends. Something had come between them, years ago—twenty or twenty-two, people said. That something, of course, had been a woman—a woman Clover and Garrison had both loved. Clover had won the woman. Because of his old love Wolf Garrison had let the Crazy Horse alone—had passed it over in his long campaign to possess himself of the Little Sonora.

The woman had been Alice Clover's mother.

Another twisted grin passed over Cody Haight's face.

He returned the letter and the photograph to the desk drawer, and replaced the revolver on top of them. Then he closed the drawer, went softly out by the window, crossed to the barn, pulled on his boots and adjusted his spurs, mounted—rode silently away.

CHAPTER XII

The Plot Opens

WHEN he left Wolf Garrison's headquarters sometime after midnight following that sudden and unexpected showdown with the overlord of the Little Sonora, Cody Haight rode at a sharp pace for several miles. But this was not because he was in any hurry; it was because his mind, fired by anger at Garrison and furiously at work on a scheme for the perfect revenge, functioned better when his lithe body was swinging to the gallop of a strong, fast horse. It gave him a feeling of action, too, without any exertion on his part and it helped him to chill his hot rage and temper it into a cold and deadly hatred.

The completeness of the project he had in mind delighted him and he went over it again and again, looking for flaws, thinking of additional touches, making sure that it had no weak link but that it would accomplish all he wanted to achieve in one masterly move. After a time, hugging himself with delight at the beauty of his plot, he pulled his horse to a walk, breathing both of them and giving himself the pleasure only an utterly selfish, cruel and merciless man can get in wholesale wickedness.

Ever since the arrival of Alice Clover in the Little Sonora he had been actively engaged in paving the way for some sort of project that would put the girl into his hands. At first sight he had wanted her and then he had had no thought concerning the terms on which she would come into his possession. It had not taken him long to discover that she was not to be had simply because he desired her; she could neither be charmed nor forced, but must be won. If anything this discovery had wetted his appetite. To give him what credit is possible, Haight had decided that she was worth winning and that he would win her as his wife since it was clear that he could not have her on any other basis.

Meantime that meant that he must have something more to offer her than the position as mate of a mere straw-boss for Wolf Garrison, even though there was a possibility that some day he would become boss of the region in his own right. And the charm of the enterprise he now contemplated was that, if successful, it would eliminate Garrison, put out of the way the dangerous interloper, Brose Fallon, wipe out those two minor menaces, old Dan Bridger and Duke Mulvahill, and at the same time give Haight himself such a hold on the renegades of Garrison's string—Navvy Pete, Stonehouse, Doc Lurie, Chavez and the rest—and the three men he had put on at the Crazy Horse that they would fall into line under him to a man. His plan contemplated using these outlaws and gunmen in such a way that they would put their lives into his hands, because they were going to pull the chestnuts from the fire for him. Haight laughed aloud. The whole thing was perfect!

It was probably after three when he reined his horse in at the Crazy Horse barn, unsaddled and stalled the beast and went quietly to the bunk-house.

"Who's there?" a voice challenged, as he entered.

"Its Haight, Sonny! Get your sleep. You'll need it."

"What time is it?"

"What do you care? Don't light a lamp. I'll turn in here by the door."

Gobey turned over and pulled up his blankets. He had time to think that Haight had probably been a-courting and to wonder vaguely why any sane man should waste his time with such foolishness, then he was snoring again. Cody Haight kicked off his boots, put his gun-belt under his pillow and rolled in. He, too, dropped off presently, but he was wide awake at the first shrill note of the alarm-clock shortly after sun-up. Jim Skillen, a lanky, hard-faced individual wearing a three-day growth of beard, swung himself to the edge of his bunk with a growl and a yawn.

"Hello, Cody!" he exclaimed, with his mouth still gaping. "When'd you breeze in?"

"Never mind about me! Kick Nickerson awake."

Sonny Gobey, whose name probably came from the boyish smoothness and chubbiness of his cheeks, was already stirring; Squint Nickerson rolled out, cursing, when Skillen had hit him twice on the soles of his feet with a piece of firewood. Nickerson had red hair, a mean mouth and one crossed eye.

"What's the idea? Who lammed me?"

"I didn't," Haight said, "but I will if you don't get the hay out of your hair. I've got a job for you tramps."

Nickerson laughed. "I was wonderin' when we'd start gettin' ourselves some chores to do 'round here. Ain't had enough to do so far to keep dust off'n our saddles."

"It will wear off today." Haight tugged on his boots. "I told you yesterday some of Garrison's monkeys were going to bushwhack this new man, Fallon, down at Bridger's old homestead."

"Yeah. What come off?"

"Nothing. Except Doc Lurie took lead."

SKILLEN swore. "Them Garrison hands couldn't put a sick porkypine on the run!" he said, disgustedly. "You give Sonny and me and Squint a chanct—"

"I'm giving it to you today. That's the job."

The three expressed gratification; Sonny Gobey began to brag of what they would do. Haight cut him short.

"That's what you say!" he observed. "Wait till tonight and then tell me what you've done. Can you get that through your chalk heads?"

"We was only sayin'—"

"I'm doing the saying. This fellow Fallon is trying to make a claim stick to the old Bridger homestead. Bridger and a fellow named Mulvahill are siding him."

"I know Duke Mulvahill," Nickerson volunteered. "If he's to be got, I want him."

"You can have him—if you can get him! And shut your loose mouth! I want Mulvahill and Bridger cleaned off the place. There's a kid, by the way. Put him on a horse and head him for Dorrance. He's spunky, so watch him!"

"And this fellow Fallon—this new hairpin—?"

"Fallon won't be there. I'm taking care of him."

Sonny Gobey, the boyish-looking youth, licked his lips. There was nothing boyish or innocent about the blasphemy with which he emphasized his answer. "We'll pig-stick 'em!" he said, in a snarl. "Only two of 'em? Easy as suckin' eggs!"

"At that, all three of you won't come back. Mulvahill is a good man with a gun, and old man Bridger can still heat iron. So if you don't want the chore, say so now!"

They protested unanimously that they wanted nothing else. They laughed at Haight's warning.

"All right; I've told you!" he said.

"When do we start?" Skillen inquired. He had reached down his cartridge belt and was examining his gun thoughtfully, with a cold and menacing care.

"Get up along the Kittens about ten o'clock and stay there. Watch Fallon's place and when you see him leave, drift in. But not before that. Understand?"

"S'pose he don't go?" Nickerson asked.

Haight paused a moment. He had the complete confidence in himself and his project of a self-centered and cocksure man; nevertheless it was possible that there might be some hitch. He had gone over the whole ground before; he went over it again, swiftly, checking contingencies. Then he said; I'm figuring that—well, that somebody will ride up to Fallon's along about ten-thirty or eleven and give him a message. I'm figuring he'll answer that message by riding off—and probably going fast. If there's a slip and you don't see him leave, ride north and move those cows off the Mink Creek range over to the east range. Then drift back here."

"Hell!" Nickerson growled, "—and not have no fun with Mulvahill?"

Cody Haight flared out at him. "Have I got to slap you over the head with a gun-barrel to make you understand I'm running this party, Squint?" he squalled. "You've heard what I said—and don't invent any ideas of your own along the way! Is that clear?"

"Sure is, Cody," Skillen said, for them all. "I take it you're tending to your own fences today."

"You take it right. Any more jackass questions?"

The trio decided there were none.

"You're getting sense! The one thing I want sure and certain is that you lie doggo up in the Kittens till after Fallon is gone. So-long—and don't get away with any thick-headed ideas that Mulvahill and old Dan Bridger can be picked off like shooting fish!"

He left them still a good deal amused at this idea; he went to the headquarters house and, as a privileged character, ordered himself a hearty breakfast in the kitchen. A week-old Dorrance paper entertained him before and after his meal; about half past seven he went to the horse barn, threw a saddle on a wiry, deep-chested Crazy Horse cayuse and headed north along the base of the Kitten Hills till he saw two horsemen pulling into a small grove of aspens from the west. He jog-trotted up and hailed the Mexican, Chavez, and Monk Stoneman.

His interview with them was brief, but what he said was so definite that even the cynical Chavez was impressed.

"Si, jefe!" he said, when every step in the project was clear. *"Bueno!"* And in swift Mexican he protested volubly that there would be no flaw in the perfect gem of Cody Haight's cutting.

HE studied their evil faces for a moment. "If there is," he said, crisply, "the world won't be big enough for either one of you to hide in. So watch yourselves!"

Then, with a careless "So long!" he rode away. In a few minutes they heard his horse's hooves ring sharply out from the ford of Mink Creek—heard his horse scrambling up the far bank. Then he rode out of their hearing at a stiff gallop, bound for Crazy Horse headquarters again.

Perhaps Duke Mulvahill had had more than anyone else to do with the fact that Alice Clover, despite her dread of trouble, her discouragement and her inexperience and feeling of helplessness, had stayed in the Little Sonora.

Because it was Duke who had told her boldly what he thought the Crazy Horse spread would be worth shortly under her management. And a growing suspicion that Mulvahill had a basis for his gloomy prediction had made her angry first and stubborn afterwards. Being the daughter of Howard Clover, when she became obstinate it took a good deal more than the combinations working against her family's western ranch property to send her home defeated!

But there were times when the girl secretly wished that she could have another talk with the laughing, straightforward, quiet-voiced young man who had left the stage with her at Scando. Cody Haight had too swiftly become a bold, self-confident love-maker; more, he had too soon shown her that he had power over her, whether she willed it or not. Brose Fallon she could understand, even if she couldn't like him. Cody Haight, the handsome, lounging, drawling ne'er-do-well she could like—perhaps too well!—but never understand.

And now she was wondering if she could believe him. Probably not! When the girl went to bed after Ferry Bowles's report on finding the drift-trap in the lower Kitten Hills she lay awake for a long time trying to explain satisfactorily to herself Cody Haight's careless dismissal of the whole episode as unimportant. Haight always evaded her. He never told her anything except what he wanted her to know. And there was no way she had yet discovered to compel him to do more! The worst of it was that when she tried to be angry with him, she became almost hypnotized by his lazy, caressing eyes and his musical voice! She began to long for the forthright man's talk and clean-cut thinking of that stranger from nowhere whom she had dismissed from the Crazy Horse and had told that she would never need him.

But she made up her mind that she would have another talk, alone, with the rotund and comical Ferry Bowles. In the morning she sent for him. He was not to be found. She went to investigate. No one knew anything about him. But he was not on the ranch.

And when she returned to the house, exasperated, angry and concerned, Cody Haight was leaning against the fireplace, rolling a cigarette and instantly beginning to make love to her with his smouldering eyes.

CHAPTER XVII

An Invitation Marked Urgent!

FOR the first time Alice Clover completely lost her temper.

"I'm tired of being made a fool of, Mr. Haight!" she said, standing to face him—slapping her gleaming boots with the crop she carried instead of the usual quirt. "What have you done with Ferry Bowles?"

"What have I done with him?" he countered, in untroubled tones. "Why, how do you figure me to pay any heed to Bowles?"

"If you must know, I'll tell you. For once I'm mad enough to speak the truth!"

"Maybe speaking it will get you over being mad, Miss Alice."

"But it won't—and it will make you angry. The truth is that this man found out something last night that you don't want me to inquire into any further."

He laughed. "I haven't thought of stopping you inquiring into anything you feel like. I'll even help you, if you'll let me."

"Help me?" She looked at him. "Don't you realize that now I can't believe a word you tell me? I'm not sure I believe much you've told me since the first minute I knew you!"

"No?" He lounged against the fireplace, looking at her quietly and with a sort of bold tenderness. "Why, that's too bad for me, then. You've just got the wrong slant on me; I can't help that."

She brushed aside his careless speech with a quick gesture.

"You are throwing me off the subject. What did this man Bowles mean when he said our cattle are drifting into Garrison territory?"

He shrugged. "You told me a minute back you didn't believe anything I said. So what's the use me answering now?"

She turned away, hiding sudden hot, furious tears. "Thank you, Mr. Haight. I won't keep you."

She knew that he did not move a muscle; she knew presently he would not. If the interview were to be concluded she would have to leave the room while he stood there, easy, unabashed, making love to her retreating back—to the very hand with which she closed the door behind her! She sat down. Without looking at him she said, as firmly as she could: "If you want to help me, why do you make everything hard for me—everything impossible!"

He said: "The trouble is with you, you want things to happen too fast. Give them time. Nothing is going to be hard for you. Things will just come around your way."

"And two hundred head of what you call feeders disappear—"

Haight pushed himself away from the fireplace and took a step toward her. "I've got something more important to watch out for now than those feeders," he said, in a quick, hard voice.

"Your quarrel with Mr. Fallon?"

"No. You."

"I didn't hire you to watch over me. I thought you—" But something in his manner checked her. Glancing up, she paused. "What do you mean?" she asked, abruptly.

"Garrison is asking after you."

"Garrison? Asking after me?"

"He sort of thinks you ought to come and call."

She saw there was more behind this casual information. "If the mighty Wolf Garrison wants to see me—"

"I know. He ought to come here himself. He isn't made that way."

She laughed. "Does this mysterious mogul of the Little Sonora really think I want to meet him?" she demanded. "You can tell him for me that I'm not interested."

"That wouldn't matter—to Garrison."

She saw that Haight was serious and she sobered. "Go on," she said, "you have something to tell me."

"If you don't go to his headquarters he may send for you." His smile was gone now and something in his face made the Eastern girl tremble a little, though she tried to hide it.

"But—I wouldn't go. You know that."

"That's why I'm staying so close, Miss Alice. I know Garrison. If he sent for you and there was nobody around, you might have to go."

"You're trying to frighten me! I'm not frightened. You can tell your friend Garrison that." She forced a laugh. "Why, I won't believe anybody would try to kidnap me—take me there by force!"

"You keep calling him my friend. But we'll let that go now. The main thing is that I've got to stay close to see you aren't bothered."

INSTANTLY she was stubbornly angry again. If he had been trying to make her so—as he may have been!—he succeeded. "I won't be guarded and watched!" she cried. "I won't have it!

Do you understand?"

"I understand. But I think you're making a mistake."

"Let me do my own thinking about that!"

"This morning, for instance, I ought to go in to Scando."

"Then go into Scando."

"But if anything happened to you—!"

"Please make up your mind that I am not one of your responsibilities, Mr. Haight!"

"Do you mean that? Is that an order?"

"It's a very definite order!"

He shifted his position slightly. "I guess you don't know just how bad some men can be, Miss Alice," he observed. "Garrison, now—"

She laughed, but she was flushing. "Please don't try to frighten me any more with the Little Sonora terror! I'm getting tired of it." She rose and walked toward the door. "By the way, while you're in town will you get me a package of needles. You wouldn't know what kind, but the clerk in the general store will. Good-bye!"

"I'll get the needles—and maybe know more about what kind than you think. But, here!" She paused and looked toward him again. He was taking a small, beautifully made revolver from a pocket inside his calf-skin vest; now he advanced, with that easy, arrogant swing of his. The weapon gleamed on the palm of his hand; it was silver-plated with gold ornaments, mother-of-pearl grips and three or four small jewels marking screw-tops. "You aren't afraid of anything," he said. "You aren't enough afraid. Carry this somewhere on you!" He laid it in her hand and his strong fingers pressed the little gun into her soft, warm palm—closed her fingers over it. "If you won't take care of yourself for Alice Clover, take a little care of her for Cody Haight!" he said.

He swung his big hat up, at its old, insolent angle and ran his hand along the brim so that it was set like a frame around his handsome, daredevil face. He moved across the room and out the door. The girl found her heart beating faster—found herself wavering toward him; for a breath she was impelled to call out—summon him back. But she conquered the impulse. She went to her room and tossed the jewel-like revolver into a drawer. She took a sudden decision to ride down to see for herself the drift-trap Ferry Bowles had described and went back to look for Jasper. He was pottering about the office and she realized that it would be useless to tell him anything about her problems. So she went to her breakfast.

It was perhaps an hour later that, after pulling on a pair of worn gloves as she stood on the ranch porch, she went out to the horse barn. The three new riders Haight had engaged for the Crazy Horse in Dorrance were nowhere to be seen, but she was capable now of saddling her own horse. As she turned into the dark, odorous stall alley her eye was caught by two horsemen coming in from the north; probably two of the precious desperados from Dorrance. Well, she had no orders for them. She did not like their looks—had had nothing to do with them thus far.

She brought out the new horse Cody Haight had found and presented to her to replace the plodding old mare she had ridden at first; she was glad no one was at hand to see her struggles with the blankets, saddle and bridle. She contrived to get the light stock tree in place presently and was tightening the cinches when a shadow fell in the door and she looked up to see in the opening a dark-faced stranger whose white teeth gleamed like pearls.

"*Buenas dias, senorita!*" the man said, in a soft, blurred voice. "Per'aps you like that I do those matter for you! I, Pedro Chavez, of the *rancho* of Senor Gary-sone!"

"Thank you, but I can do it. If you are looking for Mr. Haight—"

"No, *senorita.* I am send by Gary-sone to see only you, I theenk—Senorita Clover."

"Garrison sent you? To me?"

"He ask that per'aps you—"

"Wait! Go back to your owner and tell him I don't want his messages nor his men. Good morning!"

She started to lead her horse toward the rear of the barn, her heart beating fast. It flashed into her mind that Cody Haight had known of this call and her anger flamed against him, dulling her sudden fear. But her movement in turning was too quick and the horse threw

up his head and plunged back. Instantly Chavez was at her side—had taken the reins from her hand.

"Theee is the work for the mans, *senorita,*" he said, respectfully. His black eyes took on a submissive look. "*Ay de mi!* you do not send away the poor miser-able that would have trowble when he return an' say: "*Senor El Lobo,* thoce lady do not desire the message of you!"

SHE stepped back and faced the man angrily. "Do you really think I am going to make a call on Mr. Garrison?" she demanded.

He was still deferential, but there was a hard quality in his voice when he replied: "I theenk so."

She tried to make her laugh sound amused. "Then think again! Give me my horse."

She made a mistake there. She was angry and humiliated and she snatched at the bridle reins. Moving as smoothly as a panther the man caught her around the waist and swung her lightly to one side. Infuriated and now frightened she struck at him with her crop—fought him savagely. But he evaded her with ridiculous ease; she exhausted herself without touching him nor freeing her body from his encircling arm. Suddenly she relaxed and then he released her.

"It is better you do not fight so, *senorita,*" he said in a soothing voice. "W'en *Senor* Gary-sone geeve the order no one can say No. An' why is thoce fight against so simple theeng? *El Senor* is one fine *caballero*—the gentlemans who treat the lady weeth mos' kin'ness! Better that you go quiet, because I come for you an' I do not go back, ever, without that theeng I am send to get!"

She knew then that this was true. This somber-eyed, cold-nerved Mexican would take her to Garrison and he would take her alive and unharmed. There was no one on the place except helpless old Howard Jasper and the man who had ridden in with this Mexican was undoubtedly somewhere about to see that the bookkeeper offered no resistance. She made up her mind quickly.

"Very well," she said, as quietly as she could for her stormy breathing. "Let me go into the house and change and I promise I will go with you."

"*Bueno!*" The Mexican bowed. "For a surely you know it is no good for makin' tricks! You go on-ly for the dress?"

"I'll be back in five minutes."

He led the saddled horse toward the house while she ran on ahead. She had confused thoughts of getting help from Jasper—locking herself in her room—running to the kitchen where old Mrs. Anderson, the cook, was to be found. But the second man, a pock-marked and evil-looking individual, was in the living room and beyond him she saw the frightened old bookkeeper, mute under Monk Stonehouse's gun. She called to him: "It's all right, Mr. Jasper. I'll be back soon," and hurried to her room, where she changed as quickly as she could.

Pulling out a drawer for some needed garment she saw the revolver Haight had given her and which she had forgotten all about. Although she was afraid of the weapon and had no faint idea of using it she picked it up and slipped it into the wide pocket of the heavy riding skirt she had donned. There was nothing else she could do in the way of preparation for possible trouble; in truth she was so distressed and confused that she was moving mechanically and without any ability to plan or think things out. Before her five minutes was up she stepped from the living room on to the shaded porch looking for her captor.

His hands were on her from behind before she saw him; his voice was at her ear.

"Excuse, *senorita,* please! But sometime the leetle snake she strike."

With incredible sped and lightness his fingers ran over her body, searching her. She cried out—wheeled—tired to push the man away. He smiled at her apologetically—found the little gun in her pocket.

"So! I theenk per'aps these is part of the change of the dress w'en you ask, *senorita.* More better you do not 'ave it w'en you mak' the call on Senor, The Wolf!"

The girl shrugged, fighting for control of herself. "You must be very valuable to this Senor, The Wolf!" she said.

The pock-marked man came out of the house behind them. Chavez asked him a question in Spanish; Stonehouse answered "Yes" with a grunt.

"What have you done to Mr. Jas-

per?" Alice Clover asked, having caught his name.

"He's all right," Stonehouse said, stonily. "I hog-tied him an' locked that cookie o' your'n in the cellar. But I fixed it so's Jasper kin git hisself loose easy enough, when he gits over his scare. So you don't need to worry 'bout him."

Chavez nodded. "Bien! Now, do we ride?"

In another two minutes they left the horse barn, Chavez at Alice Clover's side —Monk Stonehouse a little behind them. And the direction they took, at a steady lope, was straight west toward the headquarters of Garrison, the Wolf of the Little Sonora.

CHAPTER XIV

"Are You Keeping Score?"

MORRIE BRIDGER wanted to stand guard, sentry-fashion, when Cody Haight's raiders had disappeared from the new shack on the old Bridger homestead. He was pretty well-pleased with himself and confidently asserted that his old blunderbuss had sunk lead in at least three of the Garrison riders.

"Git down off'n your high horse, kid," his father advised. "You think you won the Spanish-American War, but don't let it go to your head!"

"No use keeping a lookout tonight," Duke Mulvahill said, positively. "That bunch has had all the excitement they want for one evening!"

Brose Fallon agreed. "And it's the last time Haight will move in on us that way," he said. "He's too smart to try twice to saddle a horse he's found out he can't ride."

"The thunder of it is going to be figuring what sort of move he will make, too," said Mulvahill. "If it's anybody's business, Brose, how came you to know these dog-stealers were coming in on us tonight, like you did?"

Fallon told them something of his meeting with Alice Clover on the saddle of the Kittens, though not that the girl hal come that way in search of him. "I make out that Haight is straw-bossing the Crazy Horse," he added.

"Hell's bells!" Bridge exclaimed, "a day-old calf could see through that business. Haight talked her into this idea of needin' him. An', fust thing he does, he gets himself three coyote-cubs to fill his hand."

"You mean the ones that came out from Dorrance?"

Mulvahill struck in. "Gobey and Skillen and Squint Nickerson. This Miss Clover will sure have to step high and light in that nest of rattlesnakes, if she don't want to get struck!"

"It's Wolf Garrison's play, somehow," Bridger said. "Haight does the dirty work, but Garrison does the heavy thinkin'!"

"I'm not going to side you clear through on that proposition, Bridger," Fallon said. "This man Haight can think pretty fast himself. I don't know Garrison, but I'll lay a bet the length of the board that Cody Haight can keep up with him when it comes to figuring out moves."

"Uh-huh! Mebbe. Trouble is, nobody knows enough about Garrison to git a hand-holt on him. But from all you hear he's the old bear-cat himself!"

Fallon was looking into the distance abstractedly. His mouth drew down. "I'm getting pretty sick of fighting something I can't see," he observed. "One of these days I'm going to take me a little *pasear* up northwest and give your Mr. Garrison a call."

Bridger shook his head. "You won't get that far, Brose. Don't go sticking your head into a steel-trap just so's you can say afterwards that the bait's bad!"

Morrie chimed in. "I'd sure like to side you if you go to Wolf Garrison's, Brose!" he exclaimed. "Tote my ol' shot-gun along an'—!"

"You tote yore ol' shot-gun along an' go to bed, Morrie!" Bridger interrupted, glumly. "Yore gittin' so brash a good hidin' is all that'll set you back on yore feet!"

The three men engaged in little more speculation that night. Brose Fallon was thinking of Alice Clover and trying to find some excuse for going to the Crazy Horse headquarters, as he had spoken of going to Garrison's, to see for himself what conditions were. Mulvahill nodded once or twice, then stumbled to his bunk. By nine o'clock they were all asleep, Dan Bridger and the boy in the partly burned-out tent, Duke and

Fallon inside.

These two were awakened some time after midnight by a melancholy voice in their midst and Duke Mulvahill came up with a gun in his hand.

"Stand still and name yourself!" he cried. "Brose!"

Fallon replied from his bunk. "All right, Duke! Who is it, there?"

From the darkness came a long sigh.

"Dummed if you ain't the gladdest to see a feller of anybody sence the last place I was! I wisht now I'd showed some sense last Christmas when my Uncle Henry writ for me to come out to Californey an'—"

"All right, Ferry!" Mulvahill interrupted. "Light the lantern and you'll find a drink under Brose Fallon's pillow. Good night!" The long southwesterner could be heard dropping to his bunk—pulling his blankets up around him.

Brose Fallon was laughing—got up. But at the first spurt of the match he struck his laughter died.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "Duke! Come out of it! This man's hurt!"

Fat Ferry Bowles had dropped to the floor. He made a feeble effort to rise but had to give it up. While the gasoline lantern was generating Brose picked the old man from the floor and laid him gently on his own bunk. Mulvahill rose, shaking the sleep out of his head. Fallon jumped to the lantern—twisted the valve-wheel. The blue-white light flared up, with a hissing murmur. It showed Bowles cut, battered, gray with weakness and with blood drying on his face. His overalls and old coat were torn and his boots were white with dust. He opened his eyes, tried to speak, then dropped into a heavy sleep.

They heated water, got his outer clothes off and bathed his wounds; Brose Fallon swore when he found that the old man's left arm had been badly broken above the wrist.

"Look at it, Duke!" he said, angrily. "Nothing on earth but a kick from a heavy boot could have done that!"

Mulvahill fashioned rude splints from the thin plyboard seat of a chair and presently the two of them had set the arm, bound it up, given the roused patient a drink.

"Mule kick you, Ferry?" Mulvahill asked, when the sharp agony of their rude surgery brought the old cowpuncher momentarily out of his stupor.

"Cantamount!" Bowles murmured. "Two-legged." He went off to sleep again.

Duke Mulvahill stood looking down at their unexpected guest with smouldering anger. "That's one way to fire a man off the payroll of the Crazy Horse!" he exclaimed.

"Haight's work, eh?" Fallon suggested.

"Haight's idea. He'd have it done by one of those gunmen he brought out to work the Crazy Horse. Ferry was in the way somehow!"

"But why beat him up?" Fallon was frowning. "It don't look like they needed to do that to a man as easy-going as Bowles."

Mulvahill laughed bitterly. "Do you expect things to be done white-fashion in the Little Sonora? I'd've thought you'd get cured of that notion, last few days."

"Looks like they put him afoot, too!" There could be no worse offense in a cow-country. "I didn't hear a horse."

"You wouldn't."

"It's another score to even!" Fallon exclaimed.

"Hell!" Mulvahill snorted, "are you keepin' score? I've lost count!"

BOWLES was still sleeping like the dead when the Fallon household turned out, but about eight he wakened. Fallon, watching from the cabin door, saw him turn, open his eyes, stare about him for a moment, puzzled. Then Bowles raised his voice.

"Which uncle was it now? Albert? Or mebbe Ulysses. Anyhow it was the one woke up an' couldn't figger where he was. The fat man studied. "Come to think, I guess it was Felix. He was a Harris, on my mother's side."

"It couldn't have been his nephew, Ferry, could it, Bowles, by any chance?" Brose inquired, stepping through the door.

"Oh, now I know where I am at," the fat man said, with his unquenchable gameness. "I'm in the house of a friend, 'cause a enemy wouldn't be mean enough to talk thataway."

Brose laughed. "How are you feeling by now, old-timer?"

"Me? Kind o' starved down."

"That's a good sign." Fallon turned

and let out a Montana yell that brought Mulvahill their way. "Bowles, you've either got more insides than the average tally-run," he observed. "Or else you aren't hurt near as bad as Wolf Garrison's gang would wish for. Or was this one Cody Haight's?"

"How'd you come to figger it was either one of 'em?" "Course," Mulvahill said, busy at the cook-stone, "you could've fell off a horse an' then bit yourself! Tell poppy all about it son. What lit on you?"

"Wall, I'll tell you. I was like the parrot my Uncle Chester used to have."

"You talked too damn' much!" Mulvahill interrupted. Brose Fallon sobered. "What was it you were talking too much about, Bowles—and where and when and who to?"

The fat cowhand told the story of his accidental discovery of the drift-trap on the line-fence between the Crazy Horse and Garrison's range and of his indiscreet and dogged report of the find to Alice Clover in Cody Haight's presence the night before.

"Then what?" Dan Bridger asked. He and Morrie had come up during the recital.

"Wall, then, some time in the evenin' somebody hog-tied an' muzzled me an' dragged me out o' the bunk-house an' off up into the hills. The hull army fell on me then!"

"More than one of them?" Fallon asked, his eyes narrowing.

"Felt like nigher forty. I kin remember seein' Jim Skillen an' I guess the other six was Gobey and the fellow they call Squint. They're new hands over our way."

"Squint Nickerson," Mulvahill grunted. "Where was Two-deck Converse all this time, do you reckon?"

"Hell, Two-deck high-tailed off'n the Crazy Horse the same day the new hands showed up from Dorrance. He told me he could stomach Cody Haight bein' a sort of volunteer foreman for Miss Clover, but the new outfit wouldn't set a-tall!"

"What happened in the hills, Ferry?"

"They put me afoot an' then they leaned down on me!"

"How'd you come to come here?" Mulvahill wanted to know.

"They headed me toward Mrs. Pete's an' the Teapot ranch. I went that way a ways, then I swung back when they was gone an' made it here. Way it looked like to me, somebody in the Little Sonora that's square ought to know what's goin' on around."

"And you walked here?" Fallon exclaimed.

"Wall, I didn't exactly walk. Mostly I crawled. Walkin' hurt too much. Say, Duke, how about them beans you was so brash about—an' mebbe a pan o' eggs an' bacon? I'm a-goin' to start chawin' on my boot purty soon if some'n' don't happen in the food line!"

CHAPTER XV

The Alarm

MORRIE BRIDGER took over the job of feeding Ferry Bowles; Brose Fallon went outside with the other two.

"I've got me a sort of hankering to see that trap of Haight's," Mulvahill observed, thoughtfully. "A man isn't ever too old to learn new tricks."

"You know plenty of tricks," Fallon countered. "What I'd like to do is to put that trap out of commission."

"You ain't got troubles enough of your own, I reckon," Dan Bridger said.

"This sort of thing is our trouble, Bridger," Fallon replied, instantly. "It's all part and parcel of the same thing—Garrison and Haight and the way this basin has been run." And he added: "The way it isn't going to be run any more!"

"Put it that away," Bridger said, "an' I'm with you, hell to heel-taps. When do we start?"

They saddled and started immediately, giving Morrie strict admonition to keep watch and ward over Ferry Bowles.

"Don't you worry 'bout us," the fat cow-hand said, cheerfully. "Morrie an' me is thicker thieves already. When I git on my legs we're thinkin' of startin' up our own brand."

"Are we, honest?" Morrie demanded, his eyes popping. "Gee, I bet we could, too, if Brose Fallon would give us a couple calves!"

It was turning a warm day; Fallon was in no particular hurry so the three

rode easily, keeping to cover as much as possible and always watchful for signs and portents. They rode southeast, trailed up through the lower end of the Kittens, came presently to the fence line dividing the southern part of the Crazy Horse from the range claimed by and grazed by Garrison. From a rocky point they looked down presently into a canyon that was scarcely more than a draw and Mulvahill pointed.

"There she is," he said. "And there's a cow and calf moseyin' down to water right now. Let's see what they do."

What the two animals did was just about the only thing they could be expected to do in view of the clever trap someone in the Garrison outfit had made for them. The old cow was moving along with that steady gait and fixity of purpose that denotes a range critter heading for water: she looked neither to left nor to right, did not stop to graze or rest—just held her pace. The six-weeks-old calf, not as much concerned as the dam, made a calf's protest against the expedition—hanging back, blatting, running forward to cut the cow's path and crowd into her shoulders and chest in an effort to turn her. She paid no attention.

Presently the down-trail she followed became more steep; she wound in and out between scrub-oaks and big boulders; now and then she had to slide or make a short jump to get down. The calf thought all this was foolishness and said so. But he was out-voted. The pair of them came slipping, sliding, tumbling to the big pool of clear, cold water at the bottom and the old cow waded out a few steps and began to drink deeply, the calf imitating her and getting water up his nose to his disgust.

Bridger had been looking off over the Crazy Horse range. Now he grunted.

"Looks like a dam'-fool pre-ceedin's for the stock to go to that much trouble to water," he said. "But look at that windmill off to the east."

They looked. Mulvahill uttered an exclamation.

"Shut off! Swingin' around in the wind like a shirt on a wash-line!"

"Likely been shut off ever since this drift-trap was made," Bridger agreed.

"That means that the only water Crazy Horse steers can find on this end of the range is down in that draw, then," Fallon said.

"That's it. In the fall the water dries up in all these little canyons and draws that run down out of the Kittens. That's why Clover put in the windmills, years ago. There's three of them."

Fallon laughed sourly. "The trap works, too," he said. "Notice?"

They looked down into the canyon again. The cow, her thirst slaked, came out of the pool, circled it at a leisurely pace then began to nibble at willow shoots and bits of bunch grass. The calf, full of sport, raced ahead, circled, came back—went on again. An easy trail up from the water hole to the west had been cut; a few days' use had broadened it so that the cow came up without effort to the crest of a low saddle, crossed that and began to descend on to Garrison range.

"You can see from here where the line-fence was cut," Mulvahill said. "Just below that saddle." He swore. "What makes me maddest is remember-in' how hot it was the days a gang of us was down here building fence, five or six years back!"

Fallon spoke decisively. "We'll soon put a stop to this low-grade cattle rustling machine! Mulvahill, you ride over and pull on that nearest windmill. You may find that the troughs leak, but they'll swell and hold by night time. Bridger, you head that cow and calf back on to Crazy Horse ground and then we'll patch this line fence enough to make it cow-tight for the time being."

"Doesn't look to me like we'd find wire enough to make the fence hold, Fallon. And we'd have to have staples and pliers and—"

"That's what I'm figuring. I'm riding back to the place to hook up the wagon and bring down enough material to do a make-shift job. Then this afternoon I'm going to the Crazy Horse headquarters and see if Miss Clover wants any help doing the job right."

Bridger looked sour. "You're mebbe right about this bein' our trouble, Brose," he said, "but looks to me like we're crowdin' our luck takin' the hull durn basin on our backs."

MULVAHILL spoke his piece. "It's shore goin' to be just the same as publishin' a notice in the Dorrance Advocate, if we take a hand in this, Brose. Miss Clover'll know we're on to Haight's

play and Haight'll know we've been hearin' from Ferry Bowles."

"I'm not overlooking any bets, boys," Fallon jerked. "That's exactly what I want both of them to know—and the rest of the Little Sonora, too. I said this morning this basin is going to be run on new lines from now on, unless I get myself laid up with that unhealthiness you told me about the day I came, Duke!"

"Uh-huh!" the other cowman said, sententiously. "Yeh, I've noticed for quite a spell that your breath is comin' short an' you're lookin' sort of ja'n-diced! You've took sick with the Garrison disease—there's no mistake about that! Well, come on Bridger, let's be rolling. We don't want to catch the plague, if we can help it—an' it shore is mighty catchin', too!"

Bridger growled: "I'm jest a hand on this ranch o' your's, I guess, Brose, an' I'll take orders. Looks to me what ought to be done to you is laid acrost somebody's knee an' some o' the starch took out o' you. But I'm not your father, thank goodness." He turned to Mulvahill. "As for you, you look to me like yo're purty nigh as bad. But if you're cravin' to git yore hands all tore up with rusty barb-wire at yore time o' life, we'll roll. Git up, cow-horse! Let's go see ef you still know how to turn a old she-critter an' her young 'un!"

Brose Fallon rode off laughing. But he soon sobered. He was laboring under no delusions in taking a hand thus in the operations by which Garrison or Haight or both together were bleeding the life out of the Crazy Horse. He could not quite follow Cody Haight's mental processes. Obviously the handsome renegade was posing as Alice Clover's friend and, from all accounts, was making it stick. Why, at the same time, he should be rustling her cattle in this brazen, bare-faced fashion was a little difficult to make out. Brose did not think for a minute that Haight had any doubts as to his ability to win the girl: Haight wouldn't be able to reason that way—to be at all skeptical of his powers. And, though it was a bitter pill for Brose to swallow he had to admit that certainly Haight had held, up to the moment, the winning cards in that game. He was the sort of swashbuckling braggart and show-off women always were attracted by and Haight's project was helped, of course, by the fact that the girl was a stranger in a strange land, inexperienced in the hard ways of this range and probably lonely enough to crave such friendship as, sincere or not, Cody Haight offered her.

How much of a part the mysterious Wolf Garrison played in this drama Fallon had no way of guessing. Probably Garrison was content to have Cody Haight amuse himself or win himself a wife as long as the Garrison treasury profited. Brose had been wondering for a while if Garrison was the deep-dyed villain he was painted. As he had told Mulvahill, the stories about the Wolf of the Little Sonora sounded too tall to be true. But now he wavered. It looked as though he had been wrong and the rest of the Basin right!

He swung down at the cabin to hail Ferry Bowles. To his amazement he found the fat man up and pottering around the stove.

"You're a thunder of an invalid, Ferry!" he exclaimed. "What are you doing and where's Morrie?"

"Me? I'm gettin' ready to have potatoes for dinner. An' the kid went gallivantin'."

"Gallivanting where?"

"Wall, I tried to stop him, but might's well try to stop a horn' toad on a log. Morrie's got a idear he might find my ridin' hoss somewhere up towards Mink Creek an' he went lookin'."

"He'll step on a couple of Garrison men some day and they'll take a leg right off him!" Brose growled. "I don't know whether the kid is half-witted or just doesn't know what being afraid is. It's one of the two."

"He shore ain't half-witted," Ferry Bowles said. "What did you find down on the line-fence?"

Fallon reported. "I'm going to hook up the team and drag a spool of wire and some odds and ends down and stop that leak from the Crazy Horse. After that I think I'll prospect around a little and see if there's any way to stop the men that have been causing the leaks. And I wish you'd quit bothering about potatoes and take it easy."

The fat cow-hand only laughed; he said he was ashamed to be lying in bed on a bright and beautiful morning like that one and wanted to know how long

Brose thought it would be before he could take off the splints from his broken arm. Fallon gave him up—went out to the make-shift corral beyond the cabin and caught up the two old work horses. He had led them out and, at the tent, was dragging down their harnesses when he heard a horse coming at a hard run.

He dropped everything and went out.

What he saw was a laughable sight, but Brose Fallon did not laugh. Instead he pelted across to his hammer-headed horse and, flipping up a stirrup, reached for the latigo and tightened his cinch—leaped to the saddle.

The rider who was being carried on to the scene had lost one stirrup and at every jump of his running horse seemed certain to go to earth, first to one side, then to the other. His coat streamed out behind him; he clung desperately to the saddle horn; the reins were down and now and again the horse stepped on one of them, which caused him to stumble and made the uncertain seat of the unhappy horseman more unsteady and uncertain. It was Jasper, the eastern bookkeeper who had been superintendent of the Crazy Horse.

SEEING how helpless he was Fallon kicked his own mount and rode out to meet the newcomer. He caught a flying rein—brought the running horse to standstill. Jasper gasped out his alarm.

"Alice! Miss Clover! She's gone! They took her!"

He kicked himself free of the saddle—stood panting and choking on the ground. Fallon turned the horse loose.

"Who took her? Which way?"

The jerked questions were automatic; Fallon knew the answers.

"Garrison's riders." Jasper waved an arm, pointing northwest. "Toward the Wolf's headquarters!"

Brose Fallon waited for nothing more from Jasper.

He touched the hammer-head—lifted him into a long, driving lope. He remembered afterwards seeing Morrie Bridger coming in, in the distance—he thought he heard the boy yell. But at the moment he was conscious only of burning rage that flamed so hot in him that it almost obliterated from his mind the sickness of anxiety for the safety of the woman he loved.

CHAPTER XVI

Into the Trap!

WHEN Cody Haight left Alice Clover at the Crazy Horse headquarters he took the Scando road till it reached the eastern edge of the Yellow Wash; there he turned abruptly west into the Wash and began to travel at a leisurely pace, not toward the town, but toward Garrison's again.

Off to the south of him he saw the Garrison riders he had directed Monk Stonehouse to send. They were to get the Crazy Horse feeders that had come on to the range through the drift trap Ferry Bowles had stumbled on. Navvy Pete, Page and the others had picked up some of the cattle; Haight puzzled a moment as he saw the men turn their horses eastward toward Crazy Horse territory. But he did not speculate much as to their destination; they were out of the way for the purposes of his project at Garrison's and that was all that concerned him for the moment.

So far his plan was working smoothly. Stonehouse and Chavez would presently be at the Crazy Horse to take Alice Clover to Garrison's. Stonehouse was a thick-headed fool who might blunder with any delicate task, but he was a steady man accustomed to taking orders and finding pleasure in any possible sort of meanness. Chavez, on the other hand, was cool, cunning and cruel. The Mexican was not to be depended on to carry out Garrison's orders, but he had reason for a deep respect for Cody Haight and Haight knew the man would get the girl to the appointed place at Garrison headquarters if he had to carry her there.

The weak link in Haight's chain of duplicity was that involving Howard Jasper, the Crazy Horse bookkeeper and former superintendent. Haight's carefully contrived plot depended on having the news of the kidnaping reach Brose Fallon; if Monk Stonehouse followed instructions Jasper would kick himself free of his bonds and head straight for Bridger's for help. And it would be Fallon, either alone or with Duke Mulvahill, who would ride to the rescue. If Jasper, being a city man and a born fool besides, did the unexpected—failed,

rather, to do what Haight expected he would do—then the news would have to be sent to Bridger's later.

Meantime, once Fallon was clear of his newly acquired claim, Sonny Gobey, Jim Skillen and Nickerson, the three gunmen from Dorrance now hands on the Crazy Horse, would descend on the place and wipe out Mulvahill and old Dan Bridger and put the boy, Morrie, on the run. Haight himself was taking care of things at Garrison's; his handsome face became cold and cruel as he ran over in his mind once more the details of what he planned there.

Perhaps by noon he, Cody Haight, would hold the Little Sonora, Alice Clover, the Crazy Horse and the Brose Fallon claim in his hands, to do with as he would, without fear of any man's vengeance or interference! And not only would Garrison, Brose Fallon, Duke Mulvahill and old man Bridger be dead but the outlaws and gunmen remaining would be Haight's followers, tied to him and in his power because of the crimes they would have committed to bring the whole plot to fruition! Perhaps by noon! Certainly before nightfall!

Cody Haight's star was in the ascendency! He was riding high, wide and handsome!

At the western end of the long, narrow Yellow Wash was a small *cienega,* or marshland, fed by two springs and beyond the springs, on slightly higher ground, stood a big clump of willows that were less than half a mile from the sprawling adobe-and-stone house which was Garrison's headquarters. Cody Haight reached this grove around ten o'clock. As he reckoned that he would have at least half an hour to wait he loosened his cinches, grounded his bridle reins and, choosing a point from which he could see the front of the house, sat down against a tree and relaxed, resting his body for the swift action that was to come and bring his whole project to its end.

But, though he could ease the tension of muscle and nerve, he found he could not control his brain. That continued to function, going over and over the plan that had been made, testing and re-testing it—racing in a treadmill of speculation and conjecture. It drove him up, finally—set him to pacing back and forth. His nerves began to tighten. The minutes dragged. He began to wonder if there had been some hitch. And he cursed the clumsy, low-grade tools he had been compelled to use in this delicate operation.

Then he laughed softly—froze like a pointing dog scenting game!

WITH Chavez beside her and Monk Stonehouse riding flank Alice Clover came into view, not going directly to the house, but circling it and approaching it from the side. A double line of aspens bordered the lane that way and ended at the horse barn. Holding his breath—knowing that this was one of the most critical moments for the success of his plot—Haight watched till the three reached the barn. Alice Clover pulled up there—seemed to make some remonstrance. But Chavez skilfully herded her mount in through the big door; all three disappeared. Haight laughed with relief.

"That's one time Chavez had a good use for all his talents!" he said to himself, softly. "Now let's see if he can swing the rest of the rope!"

There was a delay here; for a moment Haight began to fear that something had gone wrong. But, no! Presently Chavez came out, at a leisurely pace, hitching up his chaps, dragging his spurs, and crossed to the main house. He stepped on to the porch, followed it around to the front door and entered.

Haight looked back to the barn and saw Monk Stonehouse ride out again, water his horse at the trough and set off north toward the hills, riding easily but steadily, to disappear in a draw leading up toward the big range. Good! Until he was ready to release her, Alice Clover was a prisoner in the saddle-room of the Garrison barn!

Now, every nerve tense, every muscle taut, Haight caught his horse, pulled up the cinches—mounted. If things had gone as he had planned it was only a matter of minutes from this to the end. Had Jasper released himself at the Crazy Horse? Had he been able to get himself upon a horse? Had he ridden for help to Brose Fallon's?

If he had—

Haight turned his head, listening.

He heard the long, hard, steady rhythm of the hooves of a good horse forced to the top of his speed. He

nodded. Little as he knew Brose Fallon he recognized the newcomer to the basin as a horseman. His breath came a little more quickly.

"Damn Chavez!" Haight said, half aloud. "If he doesn't move quick—!"

Then he saw the Mexican leave the rear of the house, accompanied by the deaf-mute, Dummy Joe. The two moved away from the house—were lost to view in the direction of the killing pen, well to the west. So far everything was moving like clockwork. Haight dropped a hand to his gun—made certain that it was free in its holster. No one in headquarters now but Wolf Garrison and Doc Lurie. And Lurie was helpless—bedridden—with his injured arm.

Haight frowned. Somewhere off to the east it seemed to him he heard, farther away, the sounds made by a second horse. He pulled back a few paces and looked that way, but could see nothing for the trees. Mulvahill, perhaps, trailing Brose Fallon! Well, that made two of them to handle instead of one. But Haight's blood ran colder instead of hotter at the thought. There was no power on earth that could stop him now from the consummation of his project! He had thought that Fallon would insist on coming along to the rescue of this girl; he had thought that he had estimated Fallon correctly as a man who wouldn't want to be sided on such a mission. If he had been mistaken—!

Then, light in the saddle, but pushing his tired horse to the extreme limit of its power, Brose Fallon thundered through the home gate and up the straight lane toward the front door of Wolf Garrison's lair.

Haight kneed his own horse to the very edge of the trees. He had little need of concealment longer.

Fallon was on the ground almost before the hammer-headed horse slid to a stop. The animal staggered as the rider threw himself off—seemed about to fall. But he righted himself—stood with trembling legs and heaving barrel, fighting for breath.

Brose Fallon leaped up the steps—kicked the door wide—went through it, his gun in his hand!

Haight had gone over this moment so often, in planning his project, that now the scene inside the house unrolled itself before his eyes as though he were there looking in on it.

He could see Fallon's face white with anger, he could see Wolf Garrison, in his wheel chair, look up from his desk, one hand dropping, as by habit, to that open drawer where his long revolver always lay ready; he could hear Fallon's angry challenge—his demand to know what had been done with Alice Clover. Haight knew both Garrison and Fallon:—he knew and had counted on the fact that no living human being could put a gun down on The Wolf of the Little Sonora—charge him with such an offense as this one—and not be challenged in return by Garrison's lightning-fast answer—the hidden gun spitting lead. Lightning fast! Spitting lead that would crumple up the ordinary gunman before he could press his own trigger. Lightning fast—but not fast enough for this newcomer to the Basin, whom Cody Haight had three times seen in action! And there lay the kernel of his whole plot:—Brose Fallon would get Wolf Garrison—fold him up in his chair. And then, before Fallon could get away, he would be dropped in turn by Wolf Garrison's chief lieutenant and faithful and loyal friend—by Cody Haight himself!

That was the picture.

HAIGHT sunk his spurs and his horse leaped forward.

Another running horse, well to the north, caught his eye. But he had no time now to think of its rider.

Haight laughed aloud, exulting. No matter who it was, the game was won—the trap was set and was about to fall.

And all the powers of earth could not avail to save its victims!

In a second or two he would hear a revolver shot from inside the house—perhaps two. At least one of them would have found its mark—and that mark, he was staking everything, would be the Wolf of the Little Sonora!

When he was half-way up the lane the two shots came crashing to his ears—reverberating through the big old house!

CHAPTER XVII

The Pot Backfires

WHEN Brose Fallon ran for the porch of Wolf Garrison's headquarters house his first blazing rage against this man he had never seen had cooled into a purpose as tempered as fine steel. He was going to put an end to this mysterious menace of the Little Sonora; to free Alice Clover not only from personal danger but from the gradual but apparently certain loss of the Crazy Horse property. But before Wolf Garrison died—or surrendered—Fallon was determined that the man should know just where he had stood in public estimation and particularly what Fallon himself thought of all the mumbo-jumbo of his secrecy—this hiding behind a shadowy name while cut-throats and renegades did his dirty work for him.

So his eye was clear and his hand steady when, kicking his way through the door, he found himself looking along his gun-barrel at the big, handsome, graying man in the big chair across the flat-topped desk that stood in the middle of the room.

The sharp demand that was on his lips as to the whereabouts of Alice Clover died then.

For his first glance, taking in the whole big room, showed him two things that amazed him enough to cause him to lower his six-gun.

One was that this Wolf who had given the basin its bad name was a cripple, tied to a wheel-chair.

The second was that the big man looked up at him over a picture that Fallon thought was that of Alice Clover herself.

Wolf Garrison sat quietly, only raising his eyes to the violent intrusion—otherwise unperturbed and showing neither surprise nor anger. His first words were level; his voice was not raised.

"Fallon?" Garrison said, on a rising note of question. "I thought you might show up."

Brose Fallon holstered his gun—shoved his hat back.

"I take it you're Mr. Garrison?" He used the title instinctively, without knowing he did it. For, ever since he was fifteen, he had taken orders from and given his loyalty to one range personage after another who had possessed those qualities of leadership and innate power that stamped the big man in the rolling chair beyond the desk. Wolf or not, this Garrison commanded respect!

"I'm Garrison." The boss of the Little Sonora set back on his desk the silver-framed photograph. "You've made quite a stir in our neighborhood, Fallon."

"I've stirred up a few rattlesnakes. Somehow I got the notion that you were the old daddy of them all."

Wolf Garrison's mouth set in a cold line and his eyes hardened. "Cody Haight gave you that notion," he said. "I haven't quite figured out the whole play, but it has something to do with Alice Clover. Am I right?"

"You don't know where she is?"

"No." Garrison reached into his desk—brought out a long-barreled six-gun, butt foremost. "I was supposed to commit suicide by pulling an empty gun on you if you came here. When I found that out—and guessed who emptied it on me—"

They both heard hoof-beats; at the same moment Brose Fallon saw a stealthy movement in a shadowed door beyond the desk.

In that door appeared Doc Lurie, one arm bandaged, the other throwing down a gun.

With a motion swifter than light Fallon reached, pulled, fired. Lurie's gun was discharged harmlessly as he pitched face forward, to sprawl on the floor, his limbs twitching.

Garrison did not even turn.

"Watch Haight!" he said, in a low tone.

A horse slid to a stop—running feet crossed the porch.

Brose Fallon had stepped back to stand just inside the front entrance.

Cody Haight came through, a gun in either hand.

Fallon, returning his own gun to its place, encircled Haight with a left that was like the embrace of a boa constrictor—he jerked one of Cody Haight's guns away from him and brought the butt down on the wrist of the hand that held the other, so that it fell to the floor. He kicked it into a far corner.

"Too slow, Haight!" he said, icily.

"And too late!" Wolf Garrison added, in a snarl that was not unlike that of the timber prowler from which he got his name.

FOR a moment the good-looking renegade could only stare, his mouth slack and his face drained of color. He had heard two shots; his plot had called for them and they had followed close on Brose Fallon's furious charge into the room.

Then he made out the still form at the other side of the room—one arm flung out, the other in an unnatural position at the side and bandaged in soiled cloths.

Doc Lurie!

Haight frowned, then relaxed a little. His other fools had followed orders; the only one he had not counted on because he had thought him tied to a bed had blundered into things—made hash of the one part of the dastardly project most important to Haight's program. He tried to get back something of his accustomed bravado; he titled his wide-brimmed hat and sneered.

"Looks like you've found one man you can't throw a scare into, Fallon!" he said. "I guess I must have figured you wrong!"

It was Garrison who picked him up. "No, Haight," he said, in his low, even tone, "you figured Fallon right. You missed on me."

Haight shrugged. His confidence in his star—in his luck—was beginning to return. The game wasn't played out yet. Chavez was somewhere close at hand; the Mexican had orders to toll Dummy Joe, the cook, away from the house and then come back if he were needed. And Monk Stonehouse would report before noon. If he could stall these two deadly men long enough—

"I figured you were a wolf, Garrison," he said, making his tone casually insulting; "and you turned rabbit on me. Where have you sent Miss Clover?"

Garrison looked him in the eye. "If Alice Clover comes to any harm, you polecat, I'm going to take you apart, a piece at a time. Keep that in your mind."

Brose Fallon, an on-looker for the moment, saw for the first time where Garrison had got his name. For if ever man meant what he said in making a fearful threat—meant it literally and exactly—and was capable of carrying out that threat in the same fashion, that man was the one in the wheel chair. He glanced at Cody Haight; he thought that the daredevil cringed—that Haight, too, knew Garrison was not merely talking.

"I suppose the play is to throw it on me, somehow," Haight said, wetting his lips nervously.

Brose Fallon's voice cracked like a whip. "Why, you've laid it on yourself, now, Haight! How did you happen to know Miss Clover had been sent anywhere?"

Garrison laughed at that one. "Tally! You thought up the whole thing last night when you sneaked in here and opened up my desk. You've got imagination, you shitepoke, but not enough to tell you that a man who's hobbled and hamstrung like I am notices little things." He snarled again. "Why, Haight, you couldn't blow cigarette smoke across my desk without my finding it out on you! Just another fool who was too smart!"

Haight whipped a hand across his forehead, for there was dampness gathering there. For the first time he began to wonder if he was big enough and fast enough to handle this unexpected situation and the flashing thought made him sick. He took a step back so that he could lean against the door frame—steady himself.

Brose Fallon's hand shot out and jerked him half-way across the room. He stumbled against a chair and almost fell.

"You aren't going out that door till Mr. Garrison gives the word," Fallon snapped. "And it looks to me like when you do go out you'll be carried." He turned to Garrison. "I'm new in your country and I don't know the lay of it. Where would this varmint have Miss Clover taken? Can you figure—"

There were hurrying footsteps outside; the voice of an excited boy came in to the three in the big living room.

"You darn tootin' I'll watch out, Miss Clover! I borrered Dad's six-gun an' any hair-pin thinks he kin pull anything on you has got to have his gun sure greased." The voice was raised and became shrill. "Hi, you in there! Wolf Garrison, ef you're there! I'm a-comin'

in an' I'm a-comin' heeled!"

Morrie Bridger stood in the door, with Alice Clover at his shoulder.

Wolf Garrison lifted himself slightly in his chair with his powerful arms; he broke into a hearty laugh. Brose Fallon's mouth twitched, but his eyes searched the face of the lithe girl anxiously. She flashed a nod at him—a smile that seemed to him to wipe out all misunderstanding, all impatience, all doubt.

MORRIE BRIDGER'S shoulders sagged and he lowered his heavy gun.

"Shucks!" he said, disgustedly, "you have to go and be every place, don't you, Brose Fallon?"

Fallon smiled. "It does look wrong, Morrie! But who sent you over—and where did you meet up with Miss Clover?"

The girl replied, quickly. "When I was invited over here I was told the invitation was from Mr. Garrison. I found out it was not. For some reason I was locked in the saddle room in the horse barn and I stayed there until—"

"I saw that Mexican and Monk Stonehouse take her in there," the boy interjected. "So, first thing I did, I let her out. Then I come in here to shove lead at that Wolf Garrison that's been raisin' Cain with my folks. But, like I say, Brose Fallon has all the fun. It ain't fair!"

Garrison, chuckling, pushed his chair back. "Come in, Miss Clover," he said. "I've been planning to call as soon as you were settled on the Crazy Horse. But Haight seems to have had other ideas!"

For the first time the girl saw Cody Haight, standing aside and trying to whip up his old impudent courage. She gave him an icy stare, then turned to reply to Garrison. She uttered a little cry.

"My mother!" She stared at the photograph in the silver frame—from it to the handsome man in the wheeled chair. "Why—why I know who you are, Mr. Garrison!" she exclaimed. "You're the John Garrison mother used to speak of before she died. When I was a little girl!"

His voice was unbelievably gentle when he replied. "I'm John Garrison," he said. "When I was younger I didn't mind my—er—local nickname, but I'm through with it now." He spoke more sharply. "The Little Sonora is through with it, too, and with the sort of rottenness that I'm finding out has been linked with it lately. Rustling, intimidation, arson, kidnaping—lies and brutality and meannesses a dog wouldn't be guilty of! You hear me, do you, Haight?"

Cody Haight shrugged; for the last time he tried to brazen it out.

"What's all the fine show for?" he demanded, cockily. "It doesn't fool me; save it for these new friends of your's, Garrison!"

Before anyone could reply to this insolence Morrie Bridger, in the door, called: "Brose! Here comes Dad and Duke Mulvahill."

They all heard the drumming of hooves; in a moment old Bridger and Brose Fallon's side-pardner came running, with guns out. The two men stopped in the porch door, looking foolish.

Fallon laughed. "Easy, there! Don't you two know enough to wash up before you come calling?"

The two men in the door looked down at themselves and grinned foolishly. As a matter of fact they were sorry sights. Old Dan Bridger's clothes were almost torn from him, his beard and hair were matted with sweat and he was gray with dust. Mulvahill was as bad and, in addition, showed a bullet-furrowed cheek, smeared with dry blood and his right shoulder was stained with the dull red that had dripped to it. Alice Clover uttered an exclamation of dismay.

Duke Mulvahill returned Fallon's laugh, though his throat was cracked and he seemed near to exhaustion.

"Plumb forgot my manners!" he said, sheepishly. "But after Dan and I got through heading Garrison's riders south—what was left of them that could head any place—"

"My riders?" Garrison interrupted, sharply. "What riders? And where?"

"Navvy Pete and Page and a couple more," Mulvahill said. "They ganged up on Dan Bridger and me over where your outfit built that drift-trap to bleed off Crazy Horse steers—but they weren't just lucky!"

Cody Haight, standing there forgotten for the moment, swore under his

breath. Brose Fallon took Duke Mulvahill up.

"You got somebody—when their luck ran low, Duke?"

"Navvy Pete. And two more of 'em went away looking for a doctor and plenty of running room after they found one!"

Bridger put in his oar.

"Ferry Bowles is the boy that drew all the luck!" he exclaimed. "We got to go back and dig two graves over to your place, Fallon—an' make it three if Sonny Gobey is as sick as he looked when Duke an' me seen him!"

"Bowles? But where—"

MULVAHILL answered. "Yep. Old Ferry had visitors that weren't looking for him, seems like—Cody Haight's gunmen that he brought out from Dorrance to pull the Crazy Horse out of the fire for him. And Ferry cleaned up—!"

Wolf Garrison, keener than all of them and knowing the country, its men and Cody Haight's warped mind better than any of them, laughed coldly. He turned to Haight.

"It looks like you drew to a three-card straight, polecat! But you didn't fill at either end. Some ways, Haight, I almost feel sorry for you, seeing—"

For a second time Morrie Bridger's shrill voice broke in, this time in a high cry of alarm!

"Brose! Look out! That winder!"

Fallon twisted—leaped to one side as a six-gun spoke. The others, turning toward the side window at which Morrie was pointing, saw framed there the evil face of Pedro Chavez, the Mexican.

At the same instant their ears were stunned by the roar of Brose Fallon's weapon; the cruel, dark-skinned lineaments in the casement were almost obliterated by the heavy slug of lead that smashed into them. Chavez disappeared.

Brose Fallon wiped the muzzle of his gun on his sleeve; the others were turning from the window.

In that second of time Cody Haight made his desperate move!

So swift had been the complete wrecking of his carefully-laid plot—so appalling the accumulation of news that told him that he had failed on every front—was menaced and enmeshed on every side—that his mind, usually so calculating and so dangerous, played a trick on him. It was the only explanation!

He had stood but a few steps from Wolf Garrison's desk; for the time being no one was paying him any heed.

He leaped forward, snatched from the desk Wolf Garrison's long-barrelled revolver and swung it, at point blank range, to cover Brose Fallon.

Fallon, knowing that the weapon was empty, began to laugh.

Duke Mulvahill, not knowing, jerked his iron to his hip.

Brose Fallon shouted: "Duke! No!"

But it was too late.

The gun Cody Haight had emptied to betray Wolf Garrison to his death clicked sharply as the hammer fell. With that metallic sound, flat and dead, came the thunder of Mulvahill's shot. Haight was spun once around by the impact—crumpled forward, blood pumping from a great wound in his chest.

Brose Fallon sighed—spread out his hands in a little gesture of resignation. Then he found Alice Clover at his side with her hands reaching out for him. She stared—began to cry softly—buried her face against him.

Cody Haight's death rattle sounded very loud in the stillness.

Wolf Garrison was the first to break the silence.

"Well," he said, "that seems to clean up the Little Sonora! And you mustn't cry, Alice! That man you've picked is worth a smile—and maybe a kiss!"

The girl, answering with the smile that the Wolf of the Little Sonora had suggested, lifted her face to Fallon.

Morrie Bridger looked on in disgust.

"Heck!" he said. "This is gettin' to be a sissy country. Durned ef I ain't a-goin' to clean out of it an' go down to Arizony! Want to come along, Duke Mulvahill."

It was Wolf Garrison who answered Morrie.

"Oh, don't run out on us, kid!" he said, clearing his throat a little. "From all reports the population of the Little Sonora has been cut down quite a bit today—and we're going to need all the good men we have to build it up. You'd have three outfits to choose between, if you want to learn to be a cow-hand—mine, and the Crazy Horse and this spread of Mr. Fallon's I keep hearing about."

Death Trail Dinero

By ORLANDO RIGONI

Death screamed past during the hell-moments Luke Ansted spent with a murderous gunboss and his merciless henchmen.

THERE was something ominous, and deadly about Luke Ansted, hunkered down in the far corner of "Dobe" Joe's trail dive. Death seemed to hover close to him, patiently, calmly, as though its fleshless jaws might be saying over and over:

"There's lots of time—lots of time. These foolish men who bicker, and quarrel, and make glorious gestures toward empty things like honor, and glory, and loyalty, have but a moment to live, while I have an eternity. Lots of time . . ."

Luke Ansted said nothing. His lean, work-hardened hands, that were long and pliable in spite of his callouses, toyed with the whiskey glass, or rolled incessant twirlies upon which he smoked quietly, or flipped them away unused.

For two days, Luke had been sitting there like that, whiskey glass always full, but drinking little. Rolling many cigarettes, but smoking few. His gaunt face bore the marks of wind, and sun, and hard living, and yet there was a pallor that didn't belong there. A blue scar ran from his right temple and lost itself in this thick, dark hair. A

jagged, unpatched hole in the right panel of his calf-skin vest, was mute evidence of a bullet that had almost cut Luke out of the business of living at the early age of twenty.

These were visible signs, but there was something else about the man that told of unswerving purpose. The grim set of his mouth. The questing look in his steady eyes. Now and then, Luke's chilled-steel eyes would flick toward the creaking door of the saloon, as boisterous trailhands would barge in for a slug of snake juice to slack the alkali that clogged in their lean throats.

At such times, Luke's fingers would drop the twirly they held, the glass of whiskey would click upon the bench beside him, and his hands would rest passively upon his leather-clothed thighs as he studied the men. The men, seeing him, would lose some of their good humor—would glance knowingly at each other, drink their slop and move on.

Like a slow-burning fuse, Luke was, a fuse that burned and burned, and must inevitably reach the end of its thread and spit fire into a batch of dynamite.

Dobe Joe's dive was set half way on the Clinker Trail, over which were driven thousands of cattle every season, from the sky-reaching Saginaw Mountains in the south, to the railroad shipping pens at Squaw Springs.

The place was a squat, adobe structure with sagging roof and dirt floor. There was nothing fancy about it. Half of the windows had long ago been shot out. The bar was a rickety contraption of pine boards and cedar posts. Neither was there anything fancy about the slop Joe dished out, but to the dust-choked trail waddies, it was a haven of refuge—a spring of nectar sprouting from the barren earth of the Salt Grass Flats.

There was a saying that during a season, every man within a radius of two-hundred miles, would stop at Dobe Joe's at least once. Slack-jawed, water-eyed, a little fat from easy work, Joe served them all, lawman and outlaw alike. He tended his business, and took no side in the arguments that often flared and ended in death. He shoveled dirt upon the blood spots, buried the corpse himself, and bothered himself little or none with the right or the wrong of the cause of the killing. Neither did he bother himself with the reason for Luke Ansted sitting in the corner like a rock-hewed figure. A man's business was his own.

AND Luke paid little heed to Dobe Joe. He spoke to him only when he wanted his glass filled, or another sack of makin's to dawdle away on the floor. Twice a day, Luke would leave his post, to eat the plain, wholesome meals that Dobe Joe's halfbreed wife prepared for him in the shack behind the saloon.

Luke Ansted knew, that if he waited there long enough, Zev Flack would show his hand. It might be today, it might be next week, but sooner or later, Flack would storm into Joe's for his portion of hard liquor, and news of the outfits trailing through.

Flack preyed on the cattlemen. He was like a lobo wolf, who makes his kill, and disappears mysteriously into the far-flung desolation. Flack never took cows, if he could make out otherwise. He waited until the shipping bosses were on the way home with their pockets stuffed with cash. Then he jumped them, killed them if necessary to get their hard earned wealth away from them.

The larger outfits, unable to track Flack and his band into the cedar breaks that spread like a blanket over the broken country just south of the trail, where it switched around near the

foothills of the Saginaws, had taken to sending an armed guard with the herd, to protect the money on the way home.

Flack wasn't a fool. He let the gun-cavvies alone, and confined his thieving to the smaller ranchers, who couldn't afford to hire a gun crew. A month before, Luke, and his old pardner, Pappy Logan, had trailed their fat stuff through for shipment. They hadn't had much to sell, but to Luke, that shipment had meant the fruition of years of work and dreams. With the money he had received, he had hoped to buy some more cattle across the state line, where the drought had lowered prices to way below the market value. He had hoped to build him up a herd that would make it possible for him to hire hands to do the hard work, so that Pappy Logan could spend his declining years puttering about the ranch yard.

But on the way home from Squaw Springs, Flack and his killers had jumped Luke and Pappy. Luke had been taken by surprise. Pappy had been carrying the beef money, and Luke had recklessly drawn his gun to fight off the outlaws while Pappy had raced down the trail toward home.

Luke had fought his way out of the ambush, but in the fight, his right side had been laid open with a bullet that had come within an inch of piercing his lung. Reeling, and bloody, Luke had failed to find Pappy on the long ride home. He was further stunned to find that Pappy had not arrived at their Slant-O Ranch at all.

Luke's small ranch was far from the nearest neighbors. He had bound up his wound as best he could, and had set out doggedly to find his old pardner. But there is a limit beyond which flesh and spirit cannot endure. Luke had fallen in the trail, weak from loss of blood. He had crawled back to the house, and had lain for days, half delirious with fever. He had lived on dried bread, and stale water from a wooden bucket.

Youth and strength had at last conquered death. He had tried to track Pappy, but the tracks were blown away. He began to realize the truth. Flack had somehow captured the old man, and had murdered him to get the money. For that Flack would have to die.

Those were the thoughts boiling in Luke Ansted's brain as he sat calmly in Dobe Joe's trail dive. He was living again, the days of anguish he had suffered, lying alone at the point of death. He was feeling again, the wracking loneliness of waiting — hoping — yet knowing that Pappy would never return to their Slant-O Ranch.

So now, with the wound in his side scarce healed, Luke Ansted was waiting for Zev Flack. On the third day of his vigil, three men slouched into Dobe Joe's. They shambled up to the bar, not looking at Luke, hunkered in the corner.

Luke let the unlighted twirly dribble from his fingers. He shoved the whiskey glass aside and his supple hands lay flat on his thighs against which were tied the heavy guns. The three men were marked with the longrider brand. Shiny guns—hard, cruel faces. Two of them were tall, their bristly faces as gray as the alkali dust that sifted from their chaps. The third was shorter, with red, shaggy hair, and a humorous smirk on his pinched face.

"Bottled goods!" the short man ordered in a deep voice that seemed too large for him.

DOBE JOE slid the half emptied bottle across the bar and spread out three grimy glasses. The liquor gurgled out. One of the tall men smacked his lips over the burn of it, and sleeved his bristly face.

"All right, Spindler, have yore say.

What for did yuh bring us down thisaway for?"

Spindler, the other tall man who kept scratching his hooked nose thoughtfully, cleared his throat.

"Here's my proposition, hombres. The pickin's on this trail ain't what they used tuh be. The big outfits is guardin' their money too close. The little outfits ain't worth dickerin' for. Flack's been gettin' plumb hostile lately, an' I don't like it."

The other tall man kept licking his lips as he stared at his empty glass. "Reckon yuh're right, Spindler. What yuh figger to do?"

"I'm goin' tuh pull out from Flack," Spindler said flatly.

The little, pinch-faced man, bristled. Slamming his glass down on the bar, he said in his big voice, "You'd both starve to death if you did. Flack's been doin' your figgerin'—yore thinkin'."

"I can think for myself," the first speaker snarled. "I figger we can lay our hands on some cash if Spindler ain't horsin' us."

Spindler wrinkled his crooked nose. "Sure we can, right off. We ain't made no haul since we jumped the fightin' kid an' his old pard nearly a month ago. It's a dead tuh mortal cinch the old man had the money, that's why he skinned out o' the gunwhirl. We caught him, sure, but Flack can't make him talk. I got a notion where the dinero is. We could hook onto that roll, an' slope out on Flack."

Luke stiffened. He realized that Pappy was still alive, and that he had contrived to hide the money before he had been captured. But Luke made no move. He watched the play carefully.

"I ain't buyin' no cards, gents," the little man boomed stiffly. "I throwed in with Flack for better or worse. I ain't pullin' out because he's pinched for play money."

"Yore a mite too religious thataway, Jonsey," Spindler growled.

"Call it what you will," Jonsey boomed, "but I ain't a-backin' out, an' neither are you!"

The argument waxed hot, augmented with frequent drinks from the bottle. Dobe Joe watched the men with his watery eyes and made no sign that he cared a damn what happened, but he kept out of gun range.

Luke listened tensely. His eyes followed every move of the trio. They were hard, ruthless killers, fit underlings for a gunboss like Flack. Suddenly, the argument flared to a swift tempo. Angry curses spat across the room. Spindler's voice cried out:

"Yuh're buyin' in with us, or yuh ain't buyin' atall, Jonsey!"

There was a dull, slapping sound. Spindler's hands came up, filled with cold steel. The other tall hombre slid a gun free. Jonsey was crouching back, his lightning like hands leaping to his guns.

Mysteriously, without a sound, Luke was at Jonsey's side. "Two again' one ain't my notion o' politics!" Luke said swiftly. "If you're throwin' lead, cut me a hunk o' cake!"

"It's the Slant-O hombre!" Spindler squeaked.

That adobe room was suddenly shaken by the swift roar of guns. Luke triggered his first shot, as he spun around. He saw Jonsey standing on spraddled legs, triggering his guns in swift, staccato beats.

A slug caught Jonsey in the leg and almost upset him. He dropped one gun, and clung to the bar. Luke sent a hot blast of lead into Spindler's pardner and he crumpled down. Spindler had crawled on all fours around the end of the bar, and was throwing his shots wildly from cover.

Dobe Joe was slouched back tight against the stack of barrels behind the

bar, his flabby face whiter than new chalk. Jonsey was wiping the blood from his hip and cursing softly in his big voice. Luke stood like a fixed thing in the middle of the floor.

"Come out, Spindler!" Luke snapped. He didn't want any more killing. With Spindler alive, and Jonsey to help him, he might find Flack's hideout. Then, if Pappy was alive . . .

"Come out, hands high!" he repeated.

SPINDLER came out like a catapulted thing. His gun was snarling as he leaped. Luke felt the slugs pluck at his clothing like fingers as they crashed about him. He levelled his gun. Calmly, deliberately, with death screaming past his very ear, he pulled the trigger. One shot was all it took. Spindler seemed to stop midway in his leap. A blank look spread across his evil face. The gun slid from his fingers and he tried to scratch his nose in an habitual gesture which was beyond the control of his will. Then he crashed down.

At the same instant, Luke heard a guttural, hollow command from behind him.

"Now you stand very still, hombre," Jonsey said slowly. "I reckon I owe yuh a vote o' thanks, an' that's all you're gettin'. I reckon you figure you bought me away from Flack, but you figure wrong. Stand right still, an' you'll live tuh brag about this gun-slingin'. You didn't do half bad."

Luke spun around, defying the order to stand still. Jonsey's gun was boring for his middle, but the gun was in a shaking, palsied hand. Jonsey's leg was a mangled mass of blood. Blood dripped from a crease along his red hair.

Luke stood there watching Jonsey back uncertainly toward the door. He made no move to stop him, though the chances were ten to one in his favor in a two-gun play. There was something pathetic about the little man's loyalty to a gun-boss who didn't know the meaning of the word.

Then Jonsey was outside in the afternoon sun. There was a clatter of hoofs —silence. Dobe Joe moved, and it was like a statue coming to life. Dobe Joe drew in a long breath, and made one of his infrequent remarks.

"Whyn't yuh let him have it, hombre? Yuh been layin' three days for this meetin' an' it ain't brung yuh no more'n a coupla of corpses. That shrivelled ranny was plumb ingratitudinous turnin' on yuh thataway when yuh just saved him a gun trouncin'."

Luke's mouth was a slit in his face. "I've got other notions, Joe," he said softly, and strode through the door.

Luke forked his pinto horse and headed out after the dustcloud that marked Jonsey's trail. Swiftly, he closed in upon the fleeing outlaw. He had left Jonsey live, because he felt sure that Jonsey, wounded as he was, would head for Flack's hideout. Luke had to find that hideout. He had to settle with Flack, and he had to get Pappy away if he was still alive. The thought of the tortures the old man must have been through in refusing to tell where the money had been hidden, sent a red anger flaring through Luke's lean frame.

He followed Jonsey for several miles, closing in slowly. Then they reached the cedar breaks, and Jonsey turned abruptly from the trail. Luke marked the place with his eyes. He turned off, picking up Jonsey's trail easily enough at first.

The sun became a red ball of fire in the west. Jonsey's path wound erratically through the trees. The trees became thicker where they spilled over into the bad country. The sun went

down, and dusk fell like a soft blanket. Luke urged his tired horse, fearful lest he lose the trail in the growing darkness.

As Luke paused upon the edge of a low knoll, he saw Jonsey through a break in the trees. Jonsey was rounding a sharp bend in the trail that led into a network of deep washes that had been gauged out of the soft earth by the harsh, summer rains.

Luke rode swiftly to the bend in the trail. He stared around. The trail vanished complete, and he found himself staring down into a hole nearly a hundred feet deep that the rushing floods had gouged out of the earth. Luke struck a match to examine the ground, but the search proved fruitless. He needed light to continue his pursuit. He was anxious to continue, but he wasn't a fool. In the dark he might lose the trail completely, or ride into an ambush that would spell swift and sudden death.

He pulled the rig off his horse. Then he lit a small fire and cooked some bacon and coffee which he always carried for just such emergencies as this. With dry bread to complete his meal, he ate silently.

He tried to sleep, but sleep wouldn't come. He twisted uneasily upon his saddle blanket. A coyote howled dismally in the distance. Then there was the hoot of an owl, close at hand. Luke stiffened. A rock had moved—just a pebble, somewhere on his right. His horse was grazing over to his left, so his horse couldn't have moved the pebble.

Luke sat up, his hand closing over his gun. "Who's there!" he called sharply.

No answer. There was the scrape of a boot. "I've got yuh covered," Luke warned. "Come in with clean hands or I'll . . ."

There was a low, guttural laugh not ten yards behind Luke Ansted. "Reckon yore the one what's covered, hombre. Covered proper on four sides. Be right sensible an' drop that shootin' iron. Flack would like to talk with yuh!"

Luke whirled. He knew it wasn't Jonsey talking, but he didn't believe he was surrounded. He decided to call the man's bluff. He triggered a wild shot, too high to do any harm. At the same instant, the night on either side of him was split with tongues of livid flame.

Luke dropped to all fours—flattened against the ground. He was surrounded! To try and fight four hidden adversaries at the same time would be suicide. He crawled quietly toward the hole in the earth. He heard boots thrashing through the brush toward the place where he had been. Swiftly, he reached the edge of the deep hole, and slid over, trying for a toehold with his booted foot.

Suddenly, a hand closed over his ankle. One of the gunnies had been hidden in the hole! Luke tried to kick free. There was a flurry of hands and legs, a gunbarrel slashing at his head. Luke tried to shove the gun aside. He suceeded partly, but it slashed against his ear and stunned him.

When the daze had passed off, he found himself surrounded by gunhawks, all talking at once.

"Reckon Jonsey was right," a burly man with half of one ear shot off, growled. "This is the waddy who was with the old gent the day we raided 'em. Flack'll be right glad of this."

LUKE felt himself dragged to his feet. His gun had been taken away. The wound in his side pained fiercely, but it hadn't broken open again. Because there was nothing else he could do, Luke submitted to the gunnies. At least, they would lead him to Flack.

He was startled to find himself going down on a trail that led into a hidden depression surrounded by tall greasewood. The trail wound down for fifty feet into the myriad boxlike holes that had been washed out along the edge of a great depression by the violent summer rains.

The men had all been afoot, but at the bottom of the trail were horses. Two of the men doubled up, and Luke was forced to ride the extra horse, which the leader of the men held by a rope. They rode out into the main wash and followed it for a mile or so. At last they turned abruptly into a crack in the sheer wall of earth, and entered a depression that was less than fifty feet across. It was like a large room, and a fire burned in the center of it. Pacing back and forth before the fire, was the gaunt, wolf-like form of Zev Flack.

Flack was a strange breed of man, who was forced to shun civilized living, as a wild animal was. He had graduated from one outlaw game to another, until there was nothing left for him, but killing and thieving, and dodging until some day a bullet would put an end to his skulking. As the men rattled into the depression, Flack stopped in his tracks and glowered at them.

Across the fire, lying upon a blanket, was the bloody form of Jonsey.

"That's the jasper!" Jonsey cried, sitting and pointing a finger at Luke.

At a nod from Flack, Luke slid off the horse, and stood spraddle-legged, awaiting developments. Flack swung his loose-hung frame toward Jonsey. He carried a coiled whip in his hand, which he kept beating against his black-clothed leg. His thin lips drew back off of crooked teeth that seemed too big for his mouth. Then he spoke, in a high, shrill voice.

"Jonsey, I got yuh tagged for a ten-carat liar. I sent yuh into Dobe Joe's with Spindler and Veets, to scout out the trail movements. I figger you knowed where the dinero is we should have got from the old man. Mebbe yuh don't. I figger you hooked up with this jasper, an' killed Spindler an' Veets, to get rid of them. Now yuh come snivelin' to me, because this jasper went cold on yuh. I'll beat the truth outta yuh!"

Jonsey was staggering to his feet. Fear was in his eyes. He screamed out, "I tell yuh, Flack, it was them other two who was figgerin' to cross yuh! I called their play. This hombre helped me out o' a gun corner, but I wouldn't have none of him. He followed me here."

"It's a lie!" Flack screamed in his shrill voice. "Spindler wouldn't cross me!" Flack's long arm swung back. The whip lashed out and cut across Jonsey's helpless face, drawing blood.

Luke had little reason to love Jonsey. Jonsey had turned on him after he had pulled him from a yawning grave. But Luke couldn't stand by and see a helpless man tortured. Jonsey was in bad shape, hurt too bad to take a whip beating. Like a huge jungle cat, Luke leaped across the fire, tore the whip from Flack's hand before the stunned gunboss could snatch it out of the way.

"He's speakin' gaspel truth," Luke said grimly. "His two pards were figgerin' to pull out on you, Flack. Jonsey called the play and I took cards on his side to even things up. He proved to be a right ungrateful cuss."

Flack's eyes glowed, like a cat's eyes in a dark place. His thin lips drooled a little over the words which came softly, in that high voice.

"So yuh let Jonsey go so yuh could trail him, eh?"

"Mebbe."

"You figgered to stage a gunjump on me, an' set yore pard free, is that it?" Flack fairly hissed the words.

"Reckon so. But it turned out I was

a dumb range dog, stumblin' into a guntrap."

Flack laughed dryly. "I was one too many ahead o' yuh, mister. Mebbe you can tell us where the money is you got for your steers? I can't beat the fact outta the old coot we dragged in. I've tried everything but killin', an' a dead man can't talk."

LUKE felt a flare of anger. Pappy had spent a month of horror in the outlaw camp, yet he had kept his secret—he had cached the money and had refused to reveal the hiding place. Luke looked swiftly about for a sight of the old man, but he couldn't find him.

"Where's the money?" Flack repeated evenly.

"I don't know," Luke answered calmly.

"I got ways o' joggin' yore memory," Flack warned, coiling the whip deliberately.

"Jog an' be damned! I don't know!"

Flack shrugged his loose-hung shoulders and it was like a pile of bones rattling. "We got lots o' time, mister. Take him over to see his pard, gents. Let him see a sample of our pursuadin'."

As Luke was shoved across the depression, he noticed the cleft leading off the main hole. In the mouth of the cleft was built a rude hut. He was thrust into the hut. For a moment he stood there, blinking his eyes at the darkness. His hands were free, and he felt his way about. A low moan from the corner reached his ears. Then his eyes became accustomed to the dim light filtering in through the cracks of the hut. Dimly, he saw Pappy propped in a corner, his hands lashed, spread-eagle, to the posts set up on either side of him.

"Pappy!" Luke husked dully, and all of that month of worry and pain was in that one word.

Pappy stirred. He began to gibber deliriously. "Luke, lad. I been savin' that money for yuh. It'll do yuh more good than my wuthless carcass ever could. I know what it means to yuh, lad. I been savin' that money for yuh. the money without dismountin'. Damned funny place. Rotten tree, I dodged off the main trail, an' them gunhawks rodded me down. I cached near red rocks just this side . . ."

Luke leaped across the room, and clapped his hand gently over the oldster's mouth. "Don't talk," he whispered. "They may be listening. I'll find a way to get us out of here, Pappy. You've been a glorious old fool. I couldn't get here sooner. I was bad shot up."

"I reckoned so," Pappy nodded weakly. "I saw part o' the fight you put up, an' you done right proud, lad. I ain't seein' them buzzards steal the dinero yuh slaved for so long."

Luke tugged at the ropes that held the old man. "I aim to drill Zev Flack clean center for this, Pappy," he said grimly.

At the same instant, the rickety door of the shack swung in. Flack's towering frame blotted out the opening. He laughed, a low, wolfish laugh.

"I aim to give yuh that chance, younker. I'm obliged to yuh for gettin' the old coot to tell where the dinero is hid. In a minute, yuh've done what a month of torture failed to do. Come daylight, we're takin' a little trip."

Under heavy guard, Luke spent the night with Pappy. He tried to ease the old man's suffering. Pappy's body was a mass of blue welts, inflicted by the long, black whip. His feet had been burned with hot coals. He had been half-starved to death, but he had kept his secret for the sake of the boy who had befriended him.

At the first crack of dawn, Flack came for them. It was a grim caval-

cade that set out from the depression in the earth. Pappy, and Luke, were herded behind Flack and Zigler, Flack's chief gunhand. Their hands were tied securely, and the ends of the ropes were tied to the saddle horn. Two of the gunnies did the herding, and on another horse, half dead from loss of blood the night before, rode Jonsey, whom Flack had forced to come along.

Luke couldn't figure the play out, but he knew that Flack had a desperate plan for getting hold of that money. The money seemed no longer important to Luke. All he wanted was to have Pappy free, and a chance to even up things with Zev Flack.

Flack had a keen sense of direction and a good memory for landmarks. His very life had often depended upon his knowledge of the wild country in which he operated. Therefore, he remembered the place at which Pappy had told Luke the money was cached. With unerring precision, Flack led the cavvy to that place.

They pulled up before the tree, and Flack dismounted to rummage around eagerly inside the hollow tree. His hand came out, holding nothing but a few pieces of dried horse dung. A black, devouring wrath swept across his bony face as he turned on Pappy and snarled:

"Still lyin', eh? Even to your pard, you lie! I'll teach yuh to give me the run around . . ."

THE black whip lashed at Pappy and cut into his mutilated flesh. Luke could contain himself no longer. He was as surprised as Flack to find the money wasn't there. He could see by Pappy's dumb expression, that Pappy himself was surprised.

With superhuman strength, Luke tore his hands free of the saddle horn. He launched himself from his horse, and landed upon Flack like a jungle cat starved for flesh. His bound fists beat at Flack's bony face. Flack cried out a fierce curse! He struck back with the butt of the whip. Luke's fingers sank into Flack's skinny throat. He felt the rest of the gunnies piling on him, but not until a six-gun thudded across his head, did he release his hold. He sank into a black space of oblivion.

When he regained consciousness, Luke felt a strange tugging at his arms. He tried to get his feet under him, but strangely enough they were dangling in air. Slowly, consciousness came back, and with a tense feeling of dismay, Luke found himself hung up by the arms with his feet dangling free of the earth. A rope passed from each of his wrists up over two branches of a gnarled pine tree. A man was heaving back on each of the ropes, holding him suspended.

Luke saw Flack towering over Pappy's pleading form. Pappy had tears in his eyes. "I've told yuh, Flack, I don't know where the money is. I put it in the tree. Like as not, Spindler, an' Jonsey an' that other hombre got it. They likely as not had a fight over the divvy. Mebbe Jonsey wasn't tellin' the clean truth."

Flack turned his burning eyes upon Jonsey. "Reckon, Jonsey, I brung yuh along for this very job. You say you wasn't in cahoots with the jasper hangin' in the tree. You say he helped yuh from a guncleanin' but you ain't got no love for him. Here's yore chance to prove them words. I'm giving you the first shot at him." Flack's voice was low and soft but as intense as fire.

Jonsey was a pitiful figure of fatigue and suffering. He staggered over in front of Luke, about ten yards away from him. His white face looked steadily at Flack.

"Sure, boss," he said, and his voice was no longer so big. "I stood up for yuh at Dobe Joe's. I figgered yuh was a right guy to tie up with. I'll show

yuh what I think o' this ranny."

Jonsey's hand seemed to tremble as he drew his gun. Then a change came over him. He became stiff and calm, as though he had called every resource of his hurt body to his aid. Then Jonsey's hand steadied.

Luke braced himself for the strike of the lead. A man had to die sometime. The gun roared once, twice! With a gasp, Luke felt his bonds severed neatly. His body was plummeted to the earth. The sudden release of his weight from the rope, sent the two outlaws who had been braced against them, tumbling backward off balance.

In that split second, Luke knew what it meant. Jonsey was paying up for the turn Luke had done for him in Dobe Joe's! Jonsey, half dead, had made two shots that would have done credit to Flack himself.

Luke's mind raced and his actions kept pace with his thoughts. As he hit the ground, he hurled himself at the nearest of the gunnies tumbling on the earth. He sprawled over the man and his lean hand struck once.

The man went berserk, clawing, kicking, biting. Flack was screaming in his shrill voice. Flack triggered a wild shot. The man in Luke's arms went limp. Flack's shot had hit the gunny, instead of Luke. Luke slid free of the dead weight, but the man's gun was in Luke's hand!

The next moment of hell, was like the blinking of an eye. Luke snapped a shot at the man who had held the other rope, and the man fell backward from his haunches. Luke whirled. He saw Jonsey standing there like a drunken man, his strength spent in those two deadly shots. Zigler, Flack's chief killer, was cutting down on Jonsey, and Flack was swinging around to kill Luke.

Luke didn't flinch. He walked forward, right into the face of Flack's gun-death. He kept his eyes steady upon Flack's belt buckle. If you hit them there, they fell, irregardless! Once—twice he pumped his gun. He didn't wait for Flack to fall.

LUKE spun to stop Zigler from killing Jonsey, but he was a split second too late. The two guns spoke as one! Zigler stiffened like a clubbed bull. He bated his eyes, to clear away the blood that was pouring from the hole in his forehead. He was dead before he fell.

A tense silence flung across the space. Pappy was gibbering. Luke bent over Jonsey, who was still alive. "Thanks, Jonsey," he said softly. "I reckon I owe you plenty. Here, let me fix you up . . ."

Jonsey waved him away. "Ain't no fixin' you—can—do," he breathed, and the voice that had been too big for him, had become suddenly too small. "We—we're square for what you done at Joe's place, lad. I'm feared I been backin' the wrong play . . ."

Jonsey shuddered and lay still. Luke got up slowly. He felt old, and weary. He fumbled with Pappy's bonds and set him free. Pappy was grinning like a kid.

"Reckon I know where that dinero is, Pard," he said swiftly.

"Where?"

"Rats got it!"

"Two legged rats, mebbe," Luke said wearily.

"They's trade rats, an' otherwise," Pappy shrugged. "That dried horse-dung is a trade rat trick."

Pappy was right. Not fifty feet from the tree, they turned up the stacked chips and twigs of a trade rat's nest, and underneath they found the gold coins and currency buried with other odd bits of plunder.

Tinhorn's Boothill Serenade

by RICHARD W. SPRANG

Jim Pearson fought treacherous renegades to save the Transcontinental Western while a lawman who'd kill him on sight dogged his trail.

FOR a time he didn't answer. He just stood there, a still, high figure in black hat, reversed white collar above a black silken shirt, and long black overcoat. He let his eyes drift briefly over the loafers by the stage station, then fastened them again on the sheriff's consciously menacing face. Slowly he raised his hands shoulder high, and when he spoke, his strong, rich voice held the slightest edge.

"Whatever it is you want with me, sheriff, surely it doesn't warrant the use of that revolver."

Pop Sutton, sheriff of Otero County, closed his toothless mouth tighter than ever and tipped his enormous Colt a fraction higher.

"Shut up, Mister Sky-Pilot," he cackled, "smooth talkin' makes this gun go off plumb deadly. Now stand just like you are."

"Hey, Pop," spoke up the stage driver still seated on his box behind the tall man, "are you crazy? This fellow's a minister I picked up at Tucson that's come up here to open a meetin' house. He's—"

"A minister, eh!" cut in Sutton. "Do heaven preachin' hombres go around carryin' these things?" He flicked aside the tall man's coat and drew from beneath its folds a long revolver.

"Why sure," said the slightly sur-

prised driver. "Any man, preacher or otherwise's got a right to pack a gun to pertect himself with!" His eyes twinkled. " 'Specially since this county turned you loose as its official destroyer of peace, prosperity, and the pursuit of happiness!"

The loungers laughed and Pop glared. "Yeah?" His chin whiskers bobbed up and down. "Well, look'it this, you crow bitten horse killer!" He jammed the minister's revolver behind his scarred cartridge belt and drew from his shirt pocket a folded piece of paper. Shaking it open, he held it up.

"First of all, you'll notice it says 'Wanted—dead or alive—"Fanner" Pears.' and under that is this feller's picture or I'm blind, and under that it says he's a bank robber who pulls a damn fast gun an' has killed four men doin' it!" Triumphantly he thrust it into the driver's hands.

The black garbed suspect no longer smiled. He watched as Sutton reached his poster up to the driver. He watched the sheriff's gun turn from him for an instant.

HIS elevated right hand fell and flashed across his chest and froze there. Froze because the smoke drifting from Sutton's gun barrel could be followed by another bullet that could plough into his head this time instead of his hat now lying somewhere behind him.

Sutton, now deadly quiet, stepped close to him, and drew from Pears' vest pocket a little derringer. Pears saw the contempt in the sheriff's eyes; heard the flat hush of it in his voice:

"Tinhorns carry these things. Tinhorns dress the part. Anybody that wears the cloth of God to hide his mangy carcass an' ten cent guns ought tuh be hog-tied an' gutted!"

Impulsively the old sheriff ripped the white collar from Pears' throat and whipped it once across his face. "Now wheel an' trail fur that jail over thar." He pressed his Colt to Pears' side and shoved.

Briefly Pears hesitated, then he strode up the street towards a bar windowed shed. He hated it; but this was the way they'd dealt the cards, so this was the way he'd play them.

As Sutton clanged the cell door shut, Pears shrugged off his coat and stretched out on the cot.

"Try to move out of here an' it's lead in yore guts," Sutton vowed. "I'm havin' enough trouble with that damn railroad gang layin' iron through the county an' gittin' everybody sore at 'em without playin' hide an' seek with a two-bit outlaw. So remember I'm watchin' an' listenin' fur freakish plays double hard."

"Cut it!" Pears retorted. "Get the hell out of here an' watch your little yard full of sand an' railroad tracks, but don't let any nasty ol'e choo-choo trains run over yuh!" He rolled over and grinned at a splendid rendition of mule skinner expletives as Pop stormed out.

He turned on his left side, facing the door, his head pillowed on his hand. He smiled. So Fanner Pears was in jail again. That name seemed to be synonymous with the word jail. But it wasn't a bad name; as good as any other and easy to remember. It was merely an abbreviation of his own name—Jim Pearson.

He dropped his half smile; listened to footsteps approaching in the corridor. A tall, wide cheeked man checked himself before the cell door. He grasped a bar with one hand and stood that way, slipping a cartridge in and out of its loop on his heavy gunbelt with the other hand. His pink flecked eyes shuttled over the cell while his loose lips jerked a slight rhythm with the movement.

"Why—ah—Gunderson's my name," he began, "Lash Gunderson. Thought I'd come over an' say hello."

Pearson looked him over with a slow yet slashing glance.

"All right, say it."

Gunderson's lips flicked up in a quick half smile. "Yeah, kinda wise, ain't-cha?"

"Wise enough."

"Yeah." His glance jumped over Pearson's clothes. "That stuff was plenty wise. Almost worked."

"Listen, Gunderson," Pearson said, "I don't know what you're tryin' to sell, if anything, but unless you've got the key to this cell in your pocket I ain't interested in a damn thing you've got to say."

Gunderson's oily cheeks tightened a little. "O.K., if that's the way you feel about it."

"That's the way I feel."

Their eyes locked, one pair young and steady, yet clouded with a grim awareness of the ways of men; the other pair sly and shifty, seeing all things. After the man left, Pearson wondered if it had been satisfaction he saw in those eyes. He grinned. Hell, things were shaping up pretty well at that.

Twilight settled over Ringo and with it came the peaceful hush of evening. Pearson dozed off.

HE awoke with a start, but he kept his body perfectly motionless in the utter darkness of the cell. The tapping came again at the cell window directly above his cot. He slipped from it and pressed his back to the wall.

"Pears!" came a ragged whisper.

"Keep talkin'."

"Shut up!" A hand poked through the bars, dim in the scant light of the moon. Pears caught a dull flash of metal as something dropped on the cot. "Use that and be quick about it," the voice whispered.

Pears waited a full minute, then looked quickly out the window—saw only the empty jailyard. He ran swift hands over the cot—and found a key.

A trick, maybe, on Sutton's part to get him outside so he could shoot him, thus saving the cost of his trial. But Sutton impressed him as being square, so he used the key and was soon walking down the hall.

He tried the street door. It was unlocked. Probably was a trick; that door should be locked. He kept close behind it, eased it slowly open. His glance swept the street, cutting through the layered gloom to buildings, alleys, and open lots. The long shadow running from the jail corner to the high cottonwood looked the best. He slipped to the corner.

"Freeze!"

Pearson's spine did just that, tingling with the chill that rippled it. The snout of the revolver ground against it, slipped off and pressed into the soft flesh. "Head fur that alley, slow like."

Grimly Pearson made his way into the alley, the gun prodding him all the way.

Pearson heard heavy breathing off to his left, blended with a faint obligetto of creaking leather. "We go by horse from here," the man behind him said, "Ridin' double."

This thing, Pearson thought, was breaking a little sooner than he'd expected. They pounded out of town, swung from the road and cut through wooded country. The unseen trail mounted abruptly, suddenly dropped over a ridge. They plunged through rotten shale to the bottom of a dry wash, headed up it, then drew up as a call questioned from the yard of a lighted ranch house, "That you, Nate?"

"Yeah," answered Pearson's captor.

"Get him?"

"Yep."

They dismounted and crossed the

porch, Nate's gun prodding Pearson's tall, loose shackled frame. The room was big, heavy beamed, comfortable. Beside the fireplace was a great desk littered with papers, pieces of broken saddle leather, and cartridge boxes.

Behind the desk sat Lash Gunderson.

"Howd'y, Pears," he said.

Pearson turned his glance about the room, letting its analytical spark touch each of the twelve men gathered there. Silent, grim they stood, the fire highlighting their browned cheekbones, flashing on cartridges in their belts, turning their eyes somber on his. Pearson glanced back to Gunderson.

"Sure, howd'y."

Gunderson smiled, lifting a cartridge from his belt and slipping it back again. "Looks like I had that key after all."

"Right," said Pearson. "How are these cards stacked?"

"In your favor. If you play 'em correct."

Pearson gave him a leering smile, "You lead, Gunderson. Better make it your ace."

"It'll save time," agreed Gunderson. His pinkish eyes flicked to the desk and back. "Your biography there, says you pull a fast iron. Right?"

PEARSON saw the "Fanner Pears" poster on the desk. "Sutton had an extra copy," explained Gunderson. "Is it true what it says?"

"I guess they knew what they was printin'," Pearson answered.

Gunderson creased the poster between his fingers, "I can use your guns."

Pearson shrugged. "How much?"

"Seventy-five a month."

"Yo're blowin' a stirrup, Lash."

Gunderson scowled. "Seventy-five or back you go to Sutton with a slug in your guts."

"One-fifty. An' I'm puttin' a slug in Sutton's guts," spoke Pearson.

It was the way he said it. Gunderson stopped fumbling his cartridge. "Dislike him, eh?"

"No tinned starred antique corrals me an' lives to crow about it."

Pearson caught the sudden flash in Gunderson's eyes, smiled inwardly.

"O.K., Fanner. You get one-fifty and you get Sutton, an' you do the other stuff I've got lined up for yuh." He got up and headed for the door, calling over his shoulder: "Give him the layout, Shotgun. We're ridin' in ten minutes."

Shotgun Weiler, Gunderson's stumpy chief lieutenant, stared at Pearson, his yellow eyes bleak, his black stubbled jaw latched forward as if out of joint. His voice twanged out dry and flat like a saw:

"This is Gunderson's ranch. He also runs the bank an' three saloons in Ringo. The Transcontinental Western Railroad is buildin' their main line over Redondo Mesa. Gunderson aims to stop 'em by raidin' their construction camp every now an' then, stoppin' progress, so's they'll lay their rust through his land an' his neighbor's land so's he can hold 'em up for a big profit by sellin' right-of-way high an' promisin' protection. His neighbors are this bunch of small time homesteaders," he indicated the other men in the room. Weiler went on, his lips leering, "Why the hell he rung you in on this deal is more'n I know. Watch yerself, wide loop. I'll be watchin' too."

He went to the gun rack, lifted out a sawed off shotgun with a long hunting sling, slung it across his short back. "Git yerself a iron. We're ridin'."

They rode abreast, Gunderson, Pearson, and Shotgun Weiler, followed by three others. A mile ahead rose the sheer wall of Redondo Mesa.

Pearson considered the set up. Gunderson wanted his guns for the railroad deal. He also wanted them used on

Sutton. Well, he'd asked for it. Let things start!

They climbed a rocky thread of a trail up the mesa wall, then spurred over the rolling top of the vast tableland, the night wind laying its brisk tang across their faces. Two miles; three miles.

The cavalcade halted in a deep cut. Moonlight rode steel rails stretching far in either direction. Gunderson and Pearson remained mounted while the others got down, opened saddle bags, and lifted out packages of dynamite. Under Weiler's cursing supervision they were planted beneath the rails.

Gunderson smiled, plucking at his inevitable cartridge. He glanced at Pearson. "Tomorrow this railroad quits buildin'. When their supply train hits this spot she goes to hell along with their hopes of completing construction on time."

Pearson looked skeptical, "Hell, they'll clean up this mess an' have another train through here before the dirt stops fallin'."

"Cars jammed up in this cut ain't so easy to get out," Gunderson pointed out. "And even so, there's no more supplies back east. Labor strike."

Pearson lit a cigarette, the flame lighting the hard lines of his young face. "Personally," he growled, "I don't give a damn what happens tuh this streak of rust. Yuh hired my guns, feller, not my ability tuh sit on a hoss an' watch a bunch of squatters plant thunder. I'm headin' for Sutton's ranch. I'm goin' to ventilate that buzzard's carcus."

HE wheeled his horse and struck into the trail for the Sutton spread. Shotgun Weiler lifted his head and watched him disappear. He turned his bleak eyes on Gunderson a second, then sneering inwardly, returned to work.

Jim Pearson rode swiftly toward the Sutton ranch until the cut lay well behind, then he whirled and pounded toward the false dawn already greying the east.

Ten minutes later he rode slowly into the Transcontinental Western's construction camp, past the idle work train locomotive and up to the silent sleeping cars, stopping by the one that contained the foreman's office. He hailed the car and soon got an answer. He spoke briefly with the man who appeared at the door, then climbed into the car with him.

Five minutes later the door reopened and Pearson swung down. "Be careful, Pearson," the foreman said. "God, you're putting yourself in a hell of a dangerous spot with that bunch of cutthroats."

Pearson smiled briefly. "We have to take chances like that. Intercept that other, will you?"

"You bet I will, and thanks, Jim."

Pearson mounted and rode out of the camp, headed for Gunderson's ranch.

Pearson lay full length on the sofa in the Gunderson ranch house, idly stroking the tiger cat, its low purring mingling with the irritable scratching of Gunderson's pen as he worked at his desk. The late afternoon hung warm and drowsy.

Gunderson threw down his pen, yawned, and slouched deeper in his chair. "Damn funny we haven't heard the explosion yet. That train was supposed to go through the cut an hour ago."

Pearson stirred slightly. "Yeah, damn funny," he mumbled.

Hoofbeats sounded, grew louder, slid to a stop before the door. Dust rushed in. So did Nate.

"Boss," he roared, "it didn't come off!"

"Why?" whipped out Gunderson, on his feet.

"They knew about it! They stopped the jack a half mile from the plant, the train crew an' a flock of dicks worked forward an' found the soup. I was on the bank . . . saw it all."

"Double damned holy hell!" roared Gunderson. "How in blazes did they know?"

Shotgun Weiler leaned on the door frame, slowly chewing his cigar stub, its brown juice seeping through the black stubbles on his chin.

"Kinda leaked somewhere, maybe." His yellow eyes flicked to Nate.

Nate swallowed and looked dumbly unhappy. "Lissen, Shotgun, don't look at me like . . ."

Weiler sneered, "Shut up." He rolled his head toward the couch. "By the way, where'd you go last night, Mister Minister?"

The cat stopped purring and looked inquiringly at the brown face above it; became quite disgusted as the hand gently pushed it off the couch. That hand lay very still then, close below a scarred basket-stamped holster.

"Weiler," Pearson remarked, "yore scatter gun's on yore back. Yuh better get it unslung, then do yore pryin'."

Gunderson had been fumbling with his nervous cartridge, and now he hurled it to the floor. "Cut it, you two! Right away on the prod." He turned on Weiler, "You know damn well Fanner was scoutin' around Sutton's ranch last night after he left us, tryin' tuh get a shot at him, but he didn't. Now this—"

"Funny, bein' a crack shot an' all," broke in Weiler.

"Let it ride!" roared Gunderson. "Now get this. Tonight we raid the construction camp, burn the joint and blow up that damn supply train. That'll make 'em run their road through my land or I'll tear up every foot of the rusty cowpath!

"Now get the dynamite ready and round up the men."

PEARSON got up and put on his wide hat. He hadn't expected this. "Lash," he said. "*I* wouldn't do it. They've been warned, there's a leak somewhere, today's deal proves that. By now that camp is probably armed to the teeth. But *you* bein' an aggressive man won't let that stop yuh. You'll go no matter what the odds. Now I got an idea how to cut down those odds."

"Yeah, you would have," Weiler sneered.

Pearson gave him one indifferent glance, then continued: "Sutton's undoubtedly been warned by the T.C.W. to hold himself in readiness tuh help 'em out in case of a raid. Now I'm goin' to Ringo an' kill that buzzard. I get another tin starred sucker, you raid the railroad in safety, an' the best of all you come back an' pin on Sutton's star. Why man, with the railroad on your property, and you sheriff, you'll run this country!"

Gunderson's pinkish eyes flickered evilly. "By God, yo're right, Fanner. You fork it to town an' gun that old fool, an I'll make yuh my deputy! Weiler, you get the dynamite ready. Tie four sticks in a bundle with a fuse. One for each man."

Weiler's hard face was expressionless. He backed from the door and waited on the porch as Pearson came out. Pearson stopped, his eyes raked the short man. "If yo're goin' tuh the barn, walk beside me."

Weiler's manner was suddenly agreeable. "Sure," he said, "I'm aimin' to. I was jist over curious in there. Didn't mean nothin'."

Pearson instantly took the meaning of the fellow's mood; automatically started planning. As always before something indefinable cooled him, told his reflexes when action was to come, and it left his body a machine, oiled and deadly.

He walked that way now, his senses brilliantly alert, detached from anything but the man beside him.

The barn door hung open before them. They passed it. Stopped, faced and stood that way, concealed from the house.

Pearson saw the impulse hit Weiler's eyelids a flash before it jerked his arm down and back. That warning fragment gave Pearson all the time he needed. His hand drove to his hip, but the crafty Weiler, his fingers still inches from his gun and knowing he could never fairly beat Pearson, hurled himself against the open barn door, sending it crashing against Pearson, striking him in the middle of his draw. In that instant of Pearson's momentary unbalance Weiler completed his draw, eyes glittering with trickery.

"Drop it!" came his voice, deadly quiet. He made no threat, its absence was significant. One false move Pearson realized would be his last. He dropped his half raised gun.

"So yuh went to Sutton's ranch last night, eh?" Weiler sneered. "Your tracks went just the opposite, feller, east. Toward the T.C.W. construction camp, yuh know. An' now tonight yuh want tuh go tuh Ringo tuh kill Sutton so's he won't interfere with the raid." A leer tightened his cheeks, his voice lost its mocking tone.

"Turn around, yuh blasted dick!"

Cursing the thousand odds, Pearson dived at Weiler's boots, his left hand streaking for the gun, grasped the wrist, twisted. The man whirled, sidestepped, lunged down and fell sprawling. Pearson rolled, crouched and swung and followed his blow, slamming into the half-risen Weiler, driving him crashing against the barn door. It shuddered from top to bottom and sprung shut.

Weiler, dazed, surged up and leaped heavily at Pearson. They met like two bulls, the heavier Weiler carrying Pearson before him. Cursing, heaving, they struggled, then Weiler drove a ripping left to Pearson's groin and sick from the loathsome blow, the lighter man tripped in the pile of junk beside the barn. A jagged board tore his forehead to the bone. Blood cascaded, stung his eyes, blinded him. Through a crimson haze he tried to glimpse Weiler. An invisible blow cracked on his jaw. Forgetting pain, Pearson still came on. He struck blood from his eyes but more flowed from the wide gash, and sightless he ran full into Weiler's onslaught. Flashing, splitting pain laced his skull, drove him to his knees.

A piercing call from the ranch house ran through the roaring in his ears. Weiler yelled an answer and swung his revolver barrel again. Pearson's face ploughed into the sand. A black void rushed at him as he felt himself lifted and thrown. Rough boards seared across his face. Feeling mercifully left him.

A DULL, beating pain in the top of his forehead jerked his eyes open. Instantly he closed them as prickling numbness spread through them, down his cheekbones to the roots of his teeth.

He raised a hand, felt half-caked blood covering his face. Grimly he forced open his eyes, held them that way. It was dark, thick, hay scented darkness. He was in the barn between the wheels of a buckboard, thrown there, one arm through the spokes.

Painfully he crawled out, stood erect, but collapsed against the wall, shivering with weakness. He turned his lips in a poor imitation of a smile as he clutched the boards. So Jim Pearson, ace detective of the Transcontinental Western's Intelligence Department, couldn't even stand.

His head jerked up. Hoofbeats fad-

ing. He exploded a match, peered at his watch. Eight-thirty. He'd been out a good twenty minutes.

He looked outside. The ranch house was dark. He grimly marveled at his being alive. That call he had faintly heard at the end of the fight must have been damned important, otherwise Weiler would certainly have finished him.

He hastened to the shed where the dynamite was kept, and found the boxes nearly empty. He stopped, perplexed. The construction camp was three miles away. Ringo and the sheriff two miles from here, one mile from the camp. He couldn't get to the sheriff, round up a posse, and lead it to the camp in time to do much except clean up the ruins. He had to stop the gang and get word to Sutton faster than he could take it to him, for the construction crew was not strong enough to hold off Gunderson's experienced fighters.

Suddenly he remembered old Pop Sutton's words to him after his "capture" in Ringo: "I'm havin' enough trouble with that damned railroad crew . . . so remember I'm watchin' an listenin' for freakish plays double hard." Pearson prayed he remembered them.

He stooped over one of the boxes, worked swiftly. Three minutes later he was on his horse, pounding through the ranch yard.

Redondo Mesa lay due north, the camp on it lay to the northeast. The trail from the ranch ran clear and easy up the south wall then cut in an arc towards the camp. If he took it he'd never catch up with the gang in time, so he swung east to where a creek cut the wall. He spurred up the eroded wash, many times clutching the horn to keep his weakened body from falling.

Ten minutes later Pearson sawed to a stop, literally fell from the saddle and placed his ear to the ground. Dimly came the vibrations of hard ridden horses. He was in time!

He tore at his saddle bag, ripped out a bundle of four sticks of dynamite, placed them in the center of the trail, drew his retrieved gun and crouched behind a boulder, his left hand holding his horse's nostrils.

Through the misty blue moonlight he saw them coming; ten . . . twelve . . . thirteen of them, thundering in a tight group toward him. He eared back the hammer of his Colt .45, tipped it swiftly up till its sights lay dead on the dynamite in the trail. Then he lowered it a mere fraction and squeezed the trigger until only the last ounce of slack remained. The pounding hoofs were two rods away . . . a rod. The hammer fell.

The titanic, thundering blast funneled tons of dirt high into the heavens, its mighty roar rolling far across the mesa, its echoes growling and rumbling among canyons and crags miles away.

Pearson picked himself up and grinned through blackened lips. That would bring Sutton.

It would also waken the construction crew. He made out the figure of Shotgun Weiler rising from his dead horse, and Gunderson still in the saddle, shouting orders. Four men lay on the ground.

From his rock Pearson fired twice at the group, but his bullets went wide. The terrific thrust of the explosion had all but knocked out what strength his weakened body possessed.

He ducked just as Weiler's shotgun bellowed its charge over his head. He lay flat, peered around the rock, saw Weiler creeping towards him using the scattered rocks as blinds. Gunderson's harsh voice cut the gloom: "Watch it, Weiler. That rat's hell with a gun!"

WEILER ignored him, came on. Then stopped behind a rock twenty yards away. They lay that

way, facing each other, waiting one another out.

Gunderson cursed steadily, monotonously; sawing his bucking horse down cruelly.

"I'm headin' for the camp," he yelled. "Take care of that snake, Weiler. An' this time *get him!* Come on you, buzzards!"

He raked his spurs, the horse plunged away, skirting the smoking pit, his seven men close behind.

Pearson listened to the departing hoofbeats, listened also for the faintest sound from Weiler's position. The upland night hung still.

Then Weiler's metallic voice laid its challenge across the silence: "If yuh got any guts come outa there . . . an' come a shootin'."

Pearson snapped a shot at the voice, instantly regretted it as Weiler's scatter gun roared, ploughing dirt in his face, stinging his arm with heavy buckshot. He rolled on his back, clutching his numb arm, holding back the precious blood. His head surged with pain and grimly he fought returning nausea. Couldn't hold out much longer . . . soon pass out and that rat would butcher him like a slugged steer. Better to go under fighting . . .

He felt for his gun, reloaded it, swayed to his feet, hoarsely shouting: "Get up, Weiler. We're goin' tuh hell tugether!"

Weiler rose, shotgun at his hip, rocking the hammers. Waist high above the rock Pearson felt his Colt bucking his hand, heard its shattering roar, watched Weiler stagger, catch himself, try frantically to lift his gun then buckle loosely over his rock.

For a minute he stared at the crumpled figure. He drew a great long breath, and reloaded.

Off to the north-east came the low rumbling of guns. This job wasn't finished. His tired eyes swept the mesa top, stopped on the vague outline of a horse. He managed to catch it, and slumped in the saddle, headed north.

The camp lay in a small gully. Behind the sleeping cars, tool cars, and the locomotive of the supply train lay the crew, holding off Gunderson's men concealed in the brush fringing the break of land. As yet they hadn't approached close enough to throw the dynamite bombs each man carried.

Pearson circled and came in from the east. One of the crew turned and saw him, instantly raising his rifle. Crosswell, the foreman, glimpsed him at the same time and knocked the man's gun aside. "That's Pearson, yuh damn fool! He's one of us." Then he turned to Jim and stared with amazement. "My God, Pearson," he exclaimed, "you're a hell of a sight!"

"Never mind that. How long can you hold them off? They're carryin' soup an' they'll heave it if they get close enough."

The burly foreman's face set. "Blast 'em! We're runnin' low on shells, Jim. We can't hold 'em more'n a couple of minutes."

At that instant Pearson saw a dark figure crawling swiftly through the shadows down the bank of the gully. He leaped between two cars, drawing his gun. The others saw the shadowy figure, fired hastily. The man broke into a run, halted halfway between the track and the bank, swung his arm.

Something hissed through the air, tumbled to the ground a yard from Pearson. A package of dynamite, fuse burning!

He leaped over the coupling, grasped the bundle and hurled it after the retreating man. In mid air it exploded, the shattering downthrust of it throwing him and the running figure to the ground. In the blinding flash he saw the man was Gunderson, his head twisted oddly, his shirt covered with

blood. The same instant the homesteaders charged.

Pearson's arm came up, elbow hinging to the buck of his cracking revolver. Screaming horses somersaulted. From front and sides flaming rifles, roaring Colts, hoarse curses. Bullets clanged off the locomotive, bullets ripped through crew cars. The homesteaders hesitated, fell back, and charged again.

Pearson's gun clicked dry. Cresswell, levering a jammed rifle, hurled it away, triggered his revolver at rushing figures. Pearson's Colt roared again, lead cut his boot, ploughed his shoulder. Smoke filled his lungs.

THEN there sounded a piercing Indian war whoop.

Up the track, not fifty yards away, dashed old Pop Sutton followed by a galloping body of men. Standing high in his stirrups, the old man pounded straight at Gunderson's amazed men, his Winchester cutting them from their saddles like ten-pins hit by a speeding bowling ball. Horses whirled, bucked. Men screamed beneath lashing hoofs. Gunderson lay sprawled, dead hands reached toward the railroad he wanted to destroy. Horror laid its slow, defeating silence over the field.

When the remaining outlaws were tied up, Pearson leaned against the side of a car and wearily reloaded. Pop rode triumphantly up to the railroaders. "Reminds me of the time I rode with Custer," he gleefully shouted. "Boy, did me and George clean up those Injuns! Why, we—"

He stiffened, just then catching sight of Pearson. Swiftly his hand flashed to his gun, then he stopped, looking foolish as he realized who "Pears" really was.

Pearson grinned a slow, boyish grin. "Remember me?" But his eyes held the slightest hint of moisture as he added: "Old timer, yo're all right."

"Shucks," Sutton said, embarrassed, "yo're purtty smart yoreself, young feller. Yuh had me fooled fur a minute, but," he hastily added, "I knew all along yuh wasn't a real outlaw."

Pearson winked at the grinning Cresswell and let it go. Pop Sutton's kind were all too few.

THE END.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Complete Western Book Magazine, published Monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1937.

State of New York, } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Martin Goodman, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of Complete Western Book Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York; Editor, Ward Marshall, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York; Managing Editor, Ward Marshall, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York; Business Manager, Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.)

Newsstand Publications, Inc., R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York; Martin Goodman, R.K.O. Bldg., Radio City, New York.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is..... (This information is required from daily publications only.)

MARTIN GOODMAN, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 11th day of October, 1937.

MAURICE COYNE.

[SEAL] (My commission expires March 30, 1938.)

New York Co. Dist. No. 500.

Trey Braden battled to the death in a poisonous outlaw nest for a girl who trusted him and a friend who forgot a solemn vow.

Stampede Pass

by ERIC THANE

THE drum of hoofs along the road beside which he was camped jerked Trey Braden awake. He saw a rider bearing hell-for-leather down the moonlit tracks, with a couple of hundred yards in the rear a dim fan of dust which he surmised to be a pursuing party.

Shedding his blankets, he straightened out of the sage like an apparition. The racing cayuse shied, veered at right angles, and ran a few rods until a trailing rein brought it to a halt. The rider sailed from the saddle, to land almost upon Braden's feet.

"Sorry, stranger!" Braden began to apologize. "I didn't aim to scare yore nag—"

His tongue froze. The face that looked up at him was certainly no boy's, as the costume of the rider had led him to believe. He backed away uncertainly. His sun- and wind-lined cheeks, notable for their seriousness, were more sober than ever now.

"You fool!" the girl blazed, scrambling to her feet. "Get out of my way!"

"Sorry, ma'am!" Braden said, finding his slow, serious voice which matched his face. "Reckon I shouldn't have bedded so close to the road!" He jerked his finger at the approaching dust.

"They after you?"

"Yes, oh, yes! I— But it's no business of yours!"

She raced for the cayuse, jerked the dangling rein up and rode away. In a minute she had blended with the moon-silver night, and only a dust cloud told of her flight. Trey Braden turned to face the pursuers. He could see them now, three of them. At sight of him they halted and the foremost rode ahead.

"Was thet a woman?" he called.

Braden didn't like him at first sight. The arrogant tone of the question, and especially the man's coyote face with gleaming, red-rimmed eyes aroused an instant antagonism.

"Can't say. Who're you?" he asked.

"Answer my question, cowboy!" the rider snapped, evidently not liking the evasion. "I'm Crin Hulse. Ain't never heard of me, I reckon!"

"Can't say thet I have!"

"Wall, it's a good thing to answer me anythin' I want to know!" Hulse snarled, face more coyote than ever. "Was thet a woman?"

"Mebby yes an' mebby no!"

Braden's eyes wandered to the two men in the background. They were cut of the same cloth and pattern as their leader. Braden eyed them with disfavor. Killers, all three of these riders, he decided. For their part, they saw a tall, slender young man with unusually serious face on which were whipped lines that told of a life spent in the wind and sun. They saw alkali-burnt lips which were grimly set, weather-bleached hair that glinted in the moonlight. And a gun strapped to either hip.

Sight of the guns brought a measure of respect into Crin Hulse's harsh voice, but even then the repetition of his question irritated Braden. Braden was tired from a long, dangerous trail, and tonight's breaking of his sleep angered him. He needed sleep, both to relax his saddle-wearied body and to calm nerves frayed by anxiety.

Two months back Ronat, the Wind River outlaw whom Braden's boyhood friend, Sheriff "Step'n-a-half" Dorham of Silver Arrow County, had sent up to the pen for life, had broken out. Last week word of Dorham's disappearance had reached Braden down in Wyoming. In view of Ronat's threat of revenge, this fact was sinister.

If Ronat had got Dorham— Braden didn't want to face the possibility. Dorham and he had grown up together; their trails had split only so recently as five years back. Dorham's sobriquet of "Step'n-a-half" was due to an accident of boyhood, when an outlaw cayuse had fallen upon one leg, to shorten it permanently by two inches, leaving the man with a stagger that made walking difficult but did not impair his riding ability. He rode with one stirrup shorter than the other.

"Wall, are you answerin'—" Crin Hulse began again.

Memory of the girl's scared eyes and panic-shaken voice decided Braden. He returned in his flat tones, "It was a girl, Hulse!"

Hulse seemed to leap in his saddle. "Come on, boys!" he shrilled. "Thet was Marion Hunt, all right! Let's ride!"

Trey Braden said, "Hulse, turn yore men an' head back the way you come! You ain't after Marion Hunt any more!"

Crin Hulse didn't hesitate. His face contorted. Like a coyote snarling, Braden thought. His hand dropped. Braden tensed, let the blankets he still held slip, and swung his fingers for the weapons in his belt. He beat Crin Hulse by a split-fraction of a second.

Golden flame spread from the muzzles of his Colt. Hulse yelped out a curse of pain, and dropped his gun. His left palm went up to his right arm.

"I'll git you for this!" he screeched threateningly.

Braden turned his attention to the two men in the background. Their guns were out now, muzzles up, golden flame flashing. But their horses fretted and spoiled their aim. Then one slipped to the ground. Lead hissed by Braden's ear with a murderous sound. He lashed his index fingers back against the triggers of his guns, as fast as he could move his muscles, and the shots blended into one continuous thunder of death. Flames jetted from his muzzles in a solid column.

THE man out of the saddle suddenly toppled forward. He slipped face-first into the cold buffalo-grass, his trigger-finger stiffened for good. The horseman hurled his weapon aawy in a gesture of surrender, and threw up his arms.

"Hold it!" he yelled in a panic-stricken voice.

"That's better!" Braden said, and now thru the unemotional monotony of his voice there rang the sound of steel. "Hulse, I told you to ride back the way you come, an' I mean it! I always aim to mean what I say, Hulse! Savvy that?"

The man's eyes blazed with a peculiar yellowish light, and he declared again, "I'll get you, stranger! Only way you can save yore hide now is to pull out fer parts a thousand miles away!"

"Wall, I'm stickin' in Silver Arrow County, anyway fer a little while! Now, pick up thet dead man, shove him on his cayuse, an' all of you hit back the way you came!"

They cantered off down the road, leading the one horse with the lifeless burden, and presently were lost to sight. Braden thrust his drawn guns back into their holsters. Last night he'd had a hunch that he'd better sleep with his guns on, and it seemed now that this hunch hadn't been an idle fancy.

Hastily he began to assemble his outfit. It would not be safe to linger here; Hulse might return. Braden threw things together. Then his quick look caught sight of something white lying in the sage. He bent down, lifted it—a folded paper which had obviously slipped from the girl's pocket when she'd tumbled from the cayuse.

Braden opened it curiously. It consisted merely of a single sheet, with across it a jagged pencil line resembling the outline of saw teeth, except that some of the teeth were higher than others, and there were gaps of varying sizes between. Above one of these gaps was drawn an arrow, head indicating the gap, and beneath the whole thing were the words "Hill 59."

The thing was puzzling enough, and Braden liked puzzles, but he had no time to pore over it now. He unhobbled his cayuse and prepared to ride. The encounter with the girl's pursuers had awakened him thoroughly, and tired though he was, he decided to push toward the town of Silver Arrow, county seat of Silver Arrow County, to which he had been headed last evening. He calculated that dawn should bring him there.

But grey dawn found the road stretching interminably toward a dim horizon. Braden was new to this country, and now he halted in fear that he'd been following the wrong trail. A butte a mile away caught his eye, and he decided to climb and attempt from the summit to sight anything that looked like Silver Arrow city.

In this he was disappointed. The sun rushed up to reveal a lonely, barren prairie that rollled from eastern skyline to north to south, and to west where saw-teeth mountains, bulking like a sharply-cut steel silhouette, formed a vast, forbidding rim.

"Reckon I'll hit the road again!" Braden mused.

This affair of Step'n-a-half Dorham worried him to nervousness. His lips clamped grimly. If Ronat had killed Dorham, Trey Braden was determined to hunt him down, as coldly and implacably as Ronat had no doubt hunted down Dorham. There was icy vengeance in the heart of this tall, sober-faced horseman. That was why he rode with a gun on either hip, and a third, smaller weapon concealed inside his shirt. Three guns. Men down in Wyoming called him "Trey" because of the habit.

"Put your hands to the sky, stranger!"

Braden jerked abruptly to the present. Automatically his fingers lifted while his eyes focused on a clump of sage to one side, thru which gleamed the muzzle of a gun.

"Wall, they're up!" he said coolly.

"See they remain that way!"

The voice wasn't that of a man, although the figure that arose from ambush was dressed in jeans, boots and a fringed leather shirt. Braden tensed to sudden amaze. The girl who last night had fallen into his camp!

"Wall, I never figgered to meet up with you again!" he remarked, conscious of the businesslike way she handled the gun which menaced him.

"Probably not. But I turned back when I found I'd lost the paper. Where is it?"

Braden knew she meant the sheet he'd picked up from under the sage, but fascinated by the mystery of this affair, he stalled. "I don't savvy you!" he said.

"That paper I lost when I fell! It must have come out of my pocket. I missed it a mile away and turned back,

but you were gone. You must have picked it up. Where is it?"

"Dangerous work, turnin' back, with three tough hombres after you!" Braden remarked, reflecting that she was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. "You must think a heap of thet paper! Why, Crin Hulse an' his pards might have overtook you, when you turned back!"

"I chanced it. Besides, they didn't chase me after I passed you!"

"You wonderin' why? Hear any shootin'?" Braden asked.

"I did hear shots. You mean you—" The gun muzzle lowered, then came up again with determination. "But you'd no reason to turn those men back! Where is that paper?"

"Why d'you want it?" Braden sparred.

"That's none of your business!" Marion Hunt said in a cold voice. "Just hand it over before I shoot you!"

She looked as if she meant it, Braden thought. And he hadn't enough desire for lead in him to call her bluff, if bluff it was. He indicated his pocket with a downward nod of his head. "In my belt, Marion Hunt," he said.

"Lower one hand carefully and get it. But how did you know my name?" she added.

"Little birdie told me. Little birdies are always tellin' me things!"

"Who are you?"

He was busy searching for the paper, and returned absently. "Trey Braden, cowpoke an' one-time deputy down in Wyoming. Up here lookin' fer my pard, Step'n-a-half Dorham."

"Step'n-a-half Dorham!"

The tone of her voice brought his look swiftly down to her. She appeared stunned.

"You know Dorham?" he challenged. "What d'you know about him?"

HE dropped his other hand. She seemed not to notice. He opened his mouth for another question, but before he could speak a commotion several hundred yards away attracted his attention. A dozen men broke over a rise, riding fast. The foremost carried his arm in a sling. Braden recognized him instantly. Crin Hulse! Manifestly he rode hard to make sure of his revenge. And that should be easy with all those men to back him up!

"Crin Hulse!" faltered Marion.

Braden slipped to the ground. "Put up yore gun!" he said swiftly, with the ring of steel again in his voice. "I'm yore friend! Savvy that? Them men are after me now, but findin' you here with me would suit them plenty good! Where's yore cayuse?"

"Down there!" she indicated vaguely.

"Run fer it! An' ride west! I'll be right behind!" He urged her to action. "Get it thru yore head thet I'm yore friend!" he said almost savagely. "Now, run! I'll hold 'em off until you get a good start!"

II

EVIDENTLY Hulse had sighted them at once, for the man veered and with his outfit behind him pounded forward. Braden waited tensely, his gaze alternately upon the charging horsemen and upon the coulee into which Marion had disappeared. Presently he saw her ride out upon the prairie and head west. At once he transferred all his attention in front.

"Smash 'im to bits, boys!" Crin Hulse screamed.

Braden forced his cayuse back into a depression where the animal would be safe, but himself remained out in the open. He waited until he was sure of his aim, and then his guns flamed. A man pitched forward, swung from the saddle with one boot still hooked so that he hung head down. His mount with scared leaps plunged away. A second man yelped with pain, pulled his horse to a halt, and doubled up across the horn of his saddle.

These two evidences of Braden's deadly aim had the effect of panic. The riders jerked to a halt, spilled from their horses, and sought protection in the sage. Only Hulse came on, and that was because he didn't at once notice the failure of his attack. When he did, he was out of the saddle and bellying into the grass quicker than any man Braden had ever seen execute the trick.

"I reckon thet'll hold you for a minute!" Braden thought aloud.

He slipped back to his cayuse and mounted. Leaning low in the saddle, he

broke out upon the prairie and headed after Marion. There was a volley of shots after him, men popped to their feet at his flight, and lead sang by him close but harmless. Presently he outdistanced the guns. He ventured a look back over his shoulder. His pursuers were mounting and streaming out for the chase. All except two. Braden hoped the thought of these two would force caution upon the rest.

Ahead, the girl reined up and waited for him in spite of his frantic gestures for her to ride on. He raced alongside.

"Figger I'm yore friend now?" he asked.

She nodded, but returned no answer. Braden was glad he had convinced her of the fact that he was not hostile. He remembered that he still had the paper, and noted she did not ask him for it. Not that there was time for that now, anyway; riding here stirrup to stirrup all the energy of both of them was concentrated ahead and especially behind. The pursuers had bunched up, with Crin Hulse in the lead. He pressed his horse hard, laying a quirt along the animal's flanks at regular intervals, but failed in his effort to lessen the gap between them.

Braden soon discovered that the girl's cayuse was fast and tough. His own animal was a wicked-eyed, Roman-nosed bay, and though tired from the long ride from Wyoming, managed to keep pace with Marion's horse. The pursuers began to drop behind. Braden, glancing back over his shoulder, saw Crin Hulse open his mouth in a yell of baffled rage.

"We got 'em licked!" Braden said. His words drowned in the thunder of hoofs, but Marion evidently caught the meaning of them. She shook her head vigorously, and with outflung hand indicated a jagged upthrust a mile ahead, a rise of rock barely jutting above the level of the prairie. The opposite rim of a canyon, Braden saw at once. And that jagged upthrust extended in all directions, except in the east, whence they had come, and in the north. At the same moment that Braden angled his horse north, the pursuers split and part of them rode to short-cut him.

"No chance!" Marion called. "We'll have to go down the canyon!"

Then the place sloped before them, a vast chasm sliced into the prairie, with the gleam of a creek at its bottom and walls fantastic with wind-eroded sandstone, too steep to ride. The two slipped out of the saddles and crept carefully down to the creek.

It took a long time. By the time the water was reached, Hulse and his men were on the rim. They began to descend. Braden followed Marion thru the shallow creek, and on the other side the wall loomed again.

"Ride ahead!" Braden snapped. "I'll hold 'em off until you reach the rim! Then cover me when I come up!"

He led his horse behind a rock, himself dropped to cover in a V-shaped depression in the sandstone, and before him laid his two visible guns. These warlike preparations manifestly aroused fear on the part of the pursuers, for they huddled together in conference. Then, evidently lashed on by Hulse's orders, they piled forward pell-mell.

Braden's guns spoke harshly. He saw puffs of dust and sand fly where his lead hit—except where it hit a man. This individual tumbled head-first down the slope, rolling over and over, first with grasping hands that attempted to fasten upon the rocks, then with dead arms flapping. He splashed into the water, quivered, shook, and then was still.

"One more!" Braden decided grimly. He'd thought that his deputying down in Wyoming had hardened him to the killing of men, but now he realized he was a little sick to his stomach. He didn't like the idea of driving slugs of lead into the flesh of human beings. But it was either that or feeling them in his own vitals!

"Take cover!" some one screamed, and at once the pursuers ducked behind rocks. Braden thrust his guns into their holsters and rushed for the slope, dragging the cayuse's reins behind him.

GUNS popped wickedly, and more than once dust, ground from the sandstone by bullets, shattered into his eyes. But above him Marion's gun spoke steadily. She was in a position where she could see down over the pursuers' concealment, and they were too hard put to escape her bullets to pay much attention to Braden. He scrambled up the canyon wall, and presently tumbled over the rim.

"We got 'em now!" he said. "They'll be scared to come on, afraid we'll be

layin' up here for 'em!"

He peered down. "Mebby we could pick a few of 'em off!" he mused. "But killin' is somethin' I don't take to, much! Let's ride!"

A few yards away from the rim they mounted and rode hard, into the west. The jagged, sawtoothed mountains loomed closer. Presently Braden, pulling up to a lope, asked, "Would you mind tellin' me what this is all about, Miss Hunt? I figgered you know somethin' about Step'n-a-half Dorham, judgin' from the way you said his name back there when I mentioned it?"

"How did you know my name?" she countered.

"Hulse an' his men, chasin' you last night, pulled up in my camp an' wanted to know if it was a woman who went by. They mentioned yore name."

"And what did you—"

"Wall, ma'am!" said Trey Braden, "I had a spat with Hulse, an' he quit chasin' you pronto. He must have gone back an' picked up some of his men, aimin' to settle things with me fer stoppin' him. But he was shore eager to git you last night!"

"He—I'm afraid—"

"See here!" Braden said. "You can trust me. Tell me all about this scrape. Mebby you got somethin' that'll help me find Dorham, an' mebby I can help you. What d'you say, thet's a bargain?"

"It's a bargain!" She thrust out her gloved hand, and he shook it briefly.

"Wall, shoot! What d'you know of Step'n-a-half Dorham?" he asked.

"Just that he's a rustler and a thief! He and Crin Hulse are stealing all my cattle! The instant Dad died a year ago Hulse, who has the ranch adjoining mine, started in to break me by rustling! Oh, not much at first—a few steers here and a few there! Then I lost a big herd. I complained to Sheriff Dorham at once, and he collected a posse and went out. But he couldn't find anything of the herd. They searched this country all the way to Canada, and couldn't find anything. And this country isn't easy to hide in, especially anything as big as a herd!"

"They could drive west, into the mountains!" Braden suggested, only half-heartedly, for he was reeling under her accusation that his old partner was a rustler.

"That's impossible. The mountains rise up like a wall. There's not even a pass for a railroad, because there were surveying parties thru here years ago. A herd'd have to stop at the base of the mountains. And my herd simply disappeared! Dorham acted as if I were trying to put something over on him, said he wasn't even sure any herd of mine had disappeared!"

"Crin Hulse is at the bottom of it all!" she declared violently. "I'm positive of that! And I could prove it—if I had the slightest idea where the rustlers cache the cattle!"

"But Dorham—what about him?"

"Dorham disappeared then. That was only a couple of weeks ago. He told the boys he was going out on a still hunt, and for them not to stir for a couple of months. The word's gone around that he's disappeared, but his deputies insist on following his orders. They aren't doing anything. They figure he's on a still-hunt for some outlaw. Well, it isn't for an outlaw!"

"So he's a rustler!" Braden said. He didn't believe it.

"Yes. He and Crin Hulse, and a third man I don't know but whom I've seen, joined together. They began to run my herds off until it was terrible! I've hardly anything left. And I've seen them—Hulse, and Dorham, and that third man! I shot at them once, but they only laughed at me!"

"Yo're shore it was Dorham?" Braden asked, tight-lipped.

"Positive! I saw him in the moonlight. Yesterday I heard Hulse was heading for Desmer, a little cow-town south of here. That isn't in Hulse's country, and I thought he might be there on business having to do with this rustling. So I followed! And last night I trailed him up to a hotel room, where, sure enough, he met this third man. I had hoped that Dorham might show up, but he didn't. Hulse and this third man met some others. They drew a map, and wrangled over it for a long time. I couldn't catch what it was all about. But when they all went downstairs I got the paper, and tried to sneak out the back way, but they ran into me. And then it was ride for my life! You know the rest. You have the paper. I thought you might be an enemy, and that's why I held you up!"

Trey Braden, his mind whirling, re-

peated. "You shore thet rustler was Step'n-a-half Dorham?"

"Just as sure as I'm sure of the fact that those rustled cattle seem to sink into the earth completely! I saw Dorham! He's turned rustler, and is cleverly protecting himself with the story that he's lone-wolfing for an outlaw!"

Braden wanted to say flatly, "I don't believe it!" And yet, why shouldn't he believe it? Marion's words rang of the truth. But it was utterly unlike Dorham, who had always stood for law and order, to turn desperado.

"Have you told your story to any of Dorham's deputies?" Braden asked.

"Yes. But they won't believe me! They lost faith in me when they couldn't find the first herd that disappeared. They seemed to think, because Dorham thought the same thing, that I was just bluffing when I reported a rustled herd. They scoured the country thoroughly, you see, and quickly enough after the rustling so that there wasn't much chance of driving out of the country. Oh, they didn't laugh at me—they just were polite, and reminded me that Dorham was on a still-hunt. Besides, they have great faith in Dorham. He's been the squarest and whitest man we've ever had for sheriff. I—it was a shock to see him there, driving stolen cattle—"

"I reckon they're doin' their duty in sittin' tight, since thet was Dorham's orders!" Braden said, "What did this third man look like, Miss Hunt?"

"Tall and very thin, and from what I could see, very stoop-shouldered."

RONAT, who had sworn to get Dorham and who had broken prison, was tall, thin and stoop-shouldered. The thing didn't make sense. Braden's thoughts reeled.

"See here," he said presently, "Where's yore ranch?"

"North of here! But there's not very much left. Just one herd! If they rustle that, I'm wiped out completely!"

"Need any hands?" Braden asked. His hand thrust into his pocket, rubbed the paper thoughtfully. He squinted westward, where the mountains lay like sawteeth against the horizon.

"Not many cattle left. I couldn't even pay a puncher!" Marion said. There were tears in her eyes.

Braden made his decisions quickly. He said in his slow deliberate voice, "I reckon you got another puncher, ma'am, an' I'm workin' without pay. Providin' you let me keep this map, or whatever it is you got from Hulse!"

"Why, I suppose it's all right. Do you think the map is valuable? It was valuable enough to chase me for, anyway!"

"Miss Hunt, I got a hunch, an' it's a plenty good hunch! Mebby I can locate yore herds! If all this rustlin' has been goin' on the last couple of weeks, they couldn't drive very far. It stands to reason thet them cows are somewhere in this country!"

"But that's impossible! We've searched all the way to the Canadian border!"

Braden laughed. "We'll see!" he promised, "I'm workin' my hunch. What is Hill 59?"

"A Blackfeet burying ground above my ranch. There was a mission building there at one time, too, but it's almost rotted away!"

Braden turned his cayuse. "Let's ride fer yore ranch!" he suggested. "There's work to be done!"

"Oh, I'm glad!" Marion Hunt cried, "I'm glad you'll help me. What does the 'Trey' part of your name stand for?" she added.

"Mebby I'll show you some day!"

She noted the grimness in his voice, and glanced at him quickly. His solemn face was hard as granite.

III

THE moment he arrived at the Hunt ranch, Braden had the impression of being observed. Eyes bored into his back, seemed to watch him from behind fenceposts and building corners. The feeling was anything but pleasant. Too easily a slug of lead might prove the menace of the eyes!

He found the last cows ranging a few miles west of the ranchhouse. A couple of tough-looking rannies punched the herd, but Braden could discover nothing wrong with them. They appeared honest enough, intensely loyal to their girl-boss. And to a man bitter in their indictment of Crin Hulse.

Evening of the third day of his stay at the Hunt spread found Braden on Hill 59. The name of the place had evidently come from the government's designation of the mission. The mission building was a decomposing heap now, surrounded by graves, most of them fairly ancient. The desolation and the silence, solidly unbroken aroused in Braden a thrill of superstition. And the impression of those trailing eyes tingled thru his nerves.

Deliberately he had waited until sundown to test his hunch. At that time the harsh blaze of day dropped behind the mountains, and the sawteeth lay silhouetted grim and forbidding against the sky.

Braden took out the paper Marion had stolen from Hulse. He lay it before him, and squinted first at it then at the mountains. The jagged, sawtoothed line on the paper corresponded with the jagged, sawtoothed silhouette of the horizon. Braden's heart leaped. His hunch hadn't been wrong, after all.

He located the gap in the mountains which the arrow on the paper indicated. Then, meditatively, he folded the by now soiled sheet. On second thought, he tore it to bits, and flung them fan-wise out, so that they fluttered like snowflakes. Then he started violently. He seemed absolutely to feel the gaze of eyes on him. His hands dropped to his guns. But search as he would, he failed to find the thing or being who was the cause of his nervousness.

"Don't be a fool!" he admonished himself, "Don't let yoreself get the willies!"

Riding back to the ranch, he thought of Step'n-a-half Dorham, and the girl's accusation that he'd turned rustler. Braden told himself fiercely that it wasn't true. Marion had mistaken another man for Dorham. She'd seen them at night, by the moon, and the moon could easily distort faces. Braden's heart lightened. He convinced himself, presently, that this was exactly what must have happened; Marion had never seen Dorham; she'd sighted some man who looked like him, and at once had leaped to the conclusion that it was the sheriff.

Night, dim-lit by the moon, had come when Braden rode slowly towards the home ranch. He was almost there when a thunder of hoofs alarmed him. A rider bored down on him out of the dark.

It was one of the punchers. At sight of Braden he pulled up and called excitedly, "Thet you, Braden? Lucky I run across you!"

"What's goin' on?"

"Crin Hulse an' his outfit rustlin' the last herd! I headed fer the home ranch lookin' fer you!"

"Let's ride!" Braden said briefly.

He turned his cayuse and rode hard. The gray prairie blurred under his mount's flying hoofs. The animal was eager and fresh, and Braden had outdistanced the puncher by a quarter of a mile when he broke over the rise beyond which the herd had been bedded.

He heard the pop-pop of guns, saw the flashes like fireflies, and sighted the dim mass of the herd in motion. He tore headlong forward. The heavy dust from the steer's hoofs struck him in the face, and so thick was it that it cut out the stars and the moon. It hung like fog in the wake of the herd.

Braden rode on. A horseman loomed before him, doubled over the horn with both hands under him, manifestly pulling leather. Braden hailed him.

"What's up, pard?"

He recognized one of Marion's punchers. The man seemed in great pain. Braden comprehended at once that he'd been shot.

"Hulse—he's gettin' the last of the cows—"

The man gasped out that much, then all at once he seemed to loosen. He slipped from saddle to the ground. Braden was beside him instantly, hand seeking for the pulsation of his heart. But there was none.

"Dead, I reckon!" the somber man from Wyoming said.

He piled back into the saddle and rode on out of the dust. He came across another dead man—the second of the herders. Braden remembered there had been three. The third had ridden for help and was now thundering up on Braden's heels.

"There! Over there!" he indicated.

Trey Braden saw them—three riders. One was Crin Hulse, the second a tall, thin man who humped in his saddle, the third—. Braden's heart leaped. This individual rode like Step'n-a-half Dorham, but he was too far away for Braden

to be sure. It couldn't be Dorham, he told himself fiercely. He turned his attention to the tall, thin, humped man. He'd never seen Ronat, the outlaw, but he'd heard plenty of descriptions of him. This must be Ronat, who had sworn to kill Dorham.

"Feed 'em lead!" the puncher shrilled.

Braden's guns came out, spurting golden flame. Hulse and Ronat turned to face him, but the other rider galloped on, obviously for the purpose of heading the herd. Braden heard lead whistle by his ear. Abruptly the saddle sloped under him, and his cayuse grunted. At once he thought the animal had been hit, but instantly it straightened fore hoofs from a badger hole and loped on unhurt.

Braden pulled to a halt and slipped from the saddle. He ran forward motioning to the puncher to do likewise. Thirty yards from Hulse and Ronat he paused.

"Feed 'em!" he heard the puncher repeat.

BRADEN had that intention. But Hulse and Ronat, on horseback, were moving and difficult targets. And the fact of their motion made their marksmanship all the more futile. Lead spun by Braden and the puncher, but far to one side.

"Any other rustlers?" Braden jerked out.

"Yeh. Two others. There was five men in all!"

The puncher's gun flamed alongside Braden's. The Wyoming man flung back a look at the herd; it had mixed, was milling frantically. Braden reflected that it was safe enough, entangled as it was with the leaders racing on the heels of the stragglers. It would take more than five men hindered by Braden's lead to straighten it out. Rustling for the present was out of the question.

Apparently Hulse and Ronat came to that conclusion, for suddenly they sheathed guns and fled. Braden and the puncher raced forward. Hulse yelled shrilly, and almost immediately two men joined him, followed by the third who rode like Dorham. The five pointed west.

"I'm goin' to take a chance on a long shot!" the puncher said.

His gun blazed. A horse stumbled and fell, pitched a rustler to the ground. But one of his partners reached down and hauled him up behind his saddle. The night swallowed the five men and the four horses. The cayuse which the puncher had brought down was the one ridden by the man who sat in his saddle like Step'n-a-half Dorham.

"Yore shot went low." Braden remarked.

"Long ways, anyway. Six-gun ain't much good thet far!"

Braden ran forward, determined to put a bullet thru the cayuse's head if the animal was not yet dead. He hated to see horses suffer. But the pinto's body lay stiff in death in the dusty buffalo grass. Braden bent down, hauled curiously at the saddle. Then straightened, his face grey as ashes.

The stirrups were flung out by the cayuse's fall. Braden easily measured their length with his eyes. And his judgment of length was generally accurate to within an inch.

One stirrup was longer than the other! The fact assaulted Braden like a blow of doom. Definite proof, this, that a man with one shortened leg had ridden in that saddle. Step'n-a-half Dorham, Braden's partner! It couldn't be possible. Yet this saddle proved conclusively the truth of Marion Hunt's accusation. Braden, a little sick, turned away.

Why had Dorham turned rustler? And with Ronat, the man who had sworn to kill him, as partner? Questions battered against Braden's mind. Dorham's outlawry hurt him more than any bullet in his flesh had ever done. Then his jaw hardened; his face grew more somber than ever. With swift, sure fingers he reloaded his guns.

"Listen!" he instructed the puncher, "I'm headin' west! I got a hunch where these hombres are headin', but I ain't sure. Jest the same, I'm trailin' in the direction my hunch is pullin' me! Mebby I'll stir somethin' up. Never can tell!"

"You comin' back?" the puncher inquired.

"Mebby! Who can tell?" Braden said, following his words with a tight, harsh laugh without humor.

He turned west, headed for the gap indicated by the arrow on the paper. But the mountains, in the moonlight,

were dim ghosts, and Braden lost time straightening himself out. A person acquainted with the country could have laid a beeline course, but Braden floundered in a maze of coulees that for a few hours baffled him. Then he managed to get his cayuse headed in a compass-accurate line, and from now on the mountains seemed to leap up rapidly before him.

His worry over Dorham dulled his natural caution, and it wasn't until almost dawn that he became aware of the fact that he was being trailed. Abruptly he reined up to look back. A black shadow seemed to scuttle across the prairie, headed apparently for the concealment of a cut-bank; so quickly did it move that Braden was scarcely sure he had seen it. Then he noted the fan of dust that eddied upward in the still air. A horseman had certainly been there.

"Trailin' me, eh? An' I wonder who?" Braden muttered.

He rode on, then, in a natural manner, but presently he dipped into a coulee where alongside a water hole grew a few stunted cottonwoods and willows. He cached his cayuse in the dark beneath the trees and waited.

Not for long. The horseman rode forward on his trail. Doubt stirred in Braden. This rider moved too quickly to give the impression of trailing; his mount slid down into the coulee in a cloud of dust and headed noisily past the water.

Braden stepped out, one gun up. He called sharply, "Hold up, there! An' no move fer yore shootin' irons!"

"Oh, Trey! You!"

"Marion Hunt! What're you doin' here?" Braden demanded in great amazement.

"I heard shots, and I was afraid of the herd, so I rode out. Then I met the puncher who warned you. He told me what'd happened. He said you were heading west, with a hunch about this business. Trey, I don't want you to go into any danger, but whatever danger you go into, I'm coming with you!"

"Reckon this ain't goin' to turn out to be much of a woman's job!" Braden remarked grimly.

"Trey, I'm going with you!" Her voice was determined, hard; Braden knew he could never budge her from that resolution. "What do you know, Trey? Where are you going?"

"Thet paper was a map one of the rustlers had made for the other. Thet ragged line was jest the same as the mountains looked from Hill 59. An' there looks to be a pass or somethin' where thet arrow showed on the map. Remember? Now my hunch is thet there's a pass here an' mebby they're shovin' the cows up thet way. I reckon there ain't a ghost of a chance shovin' 'em any other direction, from what I could find out the last couple of days. So west is the only way thet's left. Hulse must have run across a low pass up there where he could shove them cows across the divide an' into west Montana. Of course, thet's jest a hunch. But I'm followin' it!"

"Trey, was Dorham with those men tonight?" Marion demanded intently.

"Seems thet way. Reckon he was!" Braden heard himself say, in a low voice.

"That hurts you, doesn't it, Trey? You didn't believe me when I told you at first that Dorham was mixed up in this?"

"I believe you now! But I shore wisht I didn't!"

PRESENTLY dawn broke, and then day, with the sun rushing up in a fury of heat and light. The mountains loomed closer. Braden was amazed at their seeming impenetrability; they reared like a wall, grim and somber and menacing. The gap which guided Braden appeared here to cut only into the tip of a granite range, on which there were patches of snow.

"Oh, Trey, your idea looks impossible!" Marion cried.

"Mebby it is! But I'm pluggin' on until I'm plumb shore it is wrong!"

The foothills sloped up, their ridges presenting a jungle of stunted cottonwoods. The horses had to fight thru these. It was almost noon before the main range upreared in front of Braden and the girl.

Then he saw that he hadn't been wrong, after all. For the gap, visible there, cut deeply into the granite and twisted a tortuous trail back into the bulk of the hills. And here was a path, trampled by the hoofs of cattle.

"Reckon them's the tracks of Hunt steers!" Braden observed.

He rode on as quickly as possible, with

the girl's cayuse directly behind. The horses climbed up the gap for an hour before it widened from more than a narrow pass between frowning, snow-capped cliffs. Braden decided, from the chill in the air, and the snow, that they were now far above the prairie. Here was a land where the snow lay all summer long.

Then abruptly the gap widened into a valley, with beyond still another gap, and dimly visible over this a wilderness of mountains but none so high as the main range thru which Braden and the girl were passing. The tracks underfoot grew more pronounced. Braden breathed with relief. At least, he'd found the trail by which the herds were being run out of the prairie country.

"Look!" the girl exclaimed excitedly.

Braden followed her outstretched finger. The valley was a jungle of brush, but he glimpsed a cabin from the chimney of which smoke curled, saddled horses, a hitching rack. And cattle! They seemed to be everywhere.

"Hunt cattle! I recognize them!" Marion called.

"Glad yuh do!" a voice cut in harshly, "Ain't had time to drive 'em west yet, because we was waitin' fer thet last herd! Right lucky you come along. Mebby yuh can help us alter brands!"

From around a rock Crin Hulse rode. There was a smile that wasn't pleasant on his hard lips.

IV

"WALL, if it ain't you!" Hulse exclaimed, recognizing Braden. The gun in his hand jerked, tensed; Braden could see the skin over his knuckles whiten.

"Pard, I ought to shoot you on sight!" he said venomously. "But it jest happens thet one of our boys was killed the other night, an' you'll come in right handy to take his place. After we're done with you—"

He didn't finish the threat. But it was obvious. Braden's flesh crawled as if ice were rubbed along it. He slanted a look at Marion; her cheeks were white, but outside of that she evidenced no emotion.

"You've a clever place here, to hide my cattle!" she said quietly.

"Yeh, it's quiet an' nice. Mebby you'll like it!" Hulse said. He laughed unpleasantly, his mouth opening wide to emit a torrent of sound which echoed back from the rock walls of the pass.

Alone, Braden might have attempted to shoot his way out, but Marion complicated matters. He couldn't attempt escape when there were chances of a slug injuring or even killing her.

But the girl took matters into her own hands. She carried a light quirt, and suddenly this lashed out, to twine about the muzzle of Hulse's gun. The Colt exploded viciously but the bullet cut into the brush to one side of Braden's cayuse.

"Ride, Trey!" Marion screamed.

Braden, forcing the girl's cayuse before him, spun his own mount about. His guns leaped up. Hulse's Colt spoke again, but wildly. In the flash of an eye he tumbled back into the brush, utterly out of sight, and though Braden raked the willows with lead he was apparently unarmed for his weapon continued to speak at intervals.

"Ride! Back outa the pass!" the Wyoming man commanded swiftly.

There was a swift clatter of hoofs. Another outlaw rode hard thru the brush, cut in on Braden's path. He effectively closed the pass. It was ride into the valley, now, Braden hadn't much faith in that, and might have attempted a gun-escape thru the gap except for the fact that a third horseman appeared, headed for his companion's side.

"Reckon it's down into the brush!" Braden said grimly.

The whole valley appeared full of sound and action. Braden glimpsed men running; the door of the cabin flung violently open and two punchers appeared. They shaded their eyes and looked around for cause of the commotion. And at once, sighting it, raced for their horses and rode at crazy speed to reinforce the two men who closed the gap.

"It looks like fight, now!" Marion said. Her voice was steady. Braden experienced a thrill; his admiration for her increased.

Then her cayuse floundered and went down. The four men at the entrance to the valley opened up now. They fired

low, and lead hissed viciously close, lashing off the tips of the willows. Braden reached down, lifted the girl by her waist. Her cayuse was struggling violently with a bullet somewhere thru it.

Holding the girl, Braden forced his mount forward out of range of the six-gun slugs. There he halted.

"Listen!" he commanded swiftly, "You git on my nag an' wait here! I'm goin' back an' draw them hombres away from the pass. When it's clear—ride!"

"But Trey, what about you?"

"I reckon I'll be right behind yuh!" Braden said. But he hadn't any intentions of following. There was the solution to a mystery in this valley—why had his old partner turned outlaw? That one thing he was determined to discover.

"After yuh get thru, ride-fer-leather fer the spread!" he instructed swiftly, "Gather all the boys you can an' head back! I'll be comin' outa this place, but I'm goin' to hang around to see they don't start drivin' them cows away!"

He almost lifted her into the saddle he vacated. Then swiftly he reloaded his guns.

"Wait here! I'll draw them guards off an' then you ride!"

He ran forward. The willows were chin-high; they impeded him even while they offered protection. The four men in the pass saw him coming. They had been joined now by Hulse. Braden glimpsed other men, but they were some distance away and obviously engrossed with the cattle. They wouldn't bother, Braden decided.

He cut a wide semi-circle and presently climbed a little hill where the brush was sparse. Deliberately he moved from cover, and used himself as a decoy. Lead whipped by him, buried itself with a harsh crackling into the gravel at his feet, where it erupted small upheavals of sand and rock. Once a slug burned like the slash of a red-hot knife along his arm. It served to emphasize the fact that he was becoming careless. After that, he used more caution.

Apparently the men took his decoy bait, for they moved from the pass and came rushing down upon him. He ran a hundred yards to the left, and there in a clump of willows halted. The four outlaws bore down upon him.

"He's in thet brush! Ride 'im down!" someone screeched.

Braden looked about. The pass was open now. He let out a yell for the girl, jumped upright from cover for an instant, and gesticulated violently.

"Marion! Rider fer it!"

Then he missed Crin Hulse. Too late he saw him lurking along the opening to the pass, where he was hidden from the girl's angle of view.

"No! Back!" Braden screamed. But too late to undo his first command, for the girl was riding hard at the pass. Braden seemed to freeze. He forgot the four men bearing down upon him. He saw Marion's cayuse enter the gap; then a rope snaked out and jerked her sprawling.

At once, his attention returned to his own position. He ducked down to his haunches. His guns flamed. One of the four charging men tumbled face-down into the gravel, the force of his fall grooving the loose stuff before him like a plow. Braden emptied his gun, then turned to run. He quickly lost himself in underbrush too thick for horses to travel thru.

He cursed himself for a fool in having allowed Marion to attempt escape when Crin Hulse laid in wait. She was his captive, now. And because of his own fault, Braden accused himself. There was another task cut out for him, in addition to solving the mystery of Step's-a-half Dorham's partnership with the very man who had sworn to kill him—he had to rescue Marion—and save her herd. The immensity of the task appalled him. But resolutely he laid his plans.

HE couldn't do much until nightfall. So he buried himself in the deepest thickets where there was little chance of being discovered. Apparently the search continued unabated for several hours, until almost dark; he could hear men shouting, calling to one another, and once an outlaw with a rifle passed near him. The desperado was on foot, and peered intently everywhere. But he failed to see Braden, and when he passed Braden breathed with relief. He did not feel at this moment like running. And certainly that was the only course open to him now; he couldn't hope to fight this whole den of outlaws.

The day crept by with the speed of an eel, and Braden was glad when night

and time for action came. He waited until the moon lifted above the jagged fangs of the mountain, and then he crept out from concealment. Up here, in this high altitude, the air after dark was shot thru with ice; Braden shivered as with ague, but presently the excitement of his position steadied him. He headed straight for the cabin.

Traveling thru the brush silently was a difficult task, and Braden found he had to move very slowly. He was unused to this sort of thing; he was a prairie man, and brush was something he was unaccustomed to. But he managed to reach the cabin without much noise.

Yellow light from a lantern shone thru the cracks of the door. Braden went forward by inches, and presently lay alongside the logs of which the building was constructed. There were no windows, except for a paneless opening high in the back gable, too high for Braden to look thru. So he huddled against the wall and pressed his ear against it.

"Now, this is one heck of a fix!" a voice, evidently that of Crin Hulse, was complaining, "Things are goin' to be right mixed up with thet Braden on the loose! Reckon he found the pass by thet map Marion Hunt swiped the other night. An' now he's here. I'd jest as lief have a couple of rattlers trailin' me!"

"Wall, it can't be helped now!" some one returned, in tones Braden didn't recognize, but by their chill undertone took as belonging to Ronat, "He's here, an' we'll have to move fast. I've heard of him down in Wyoming. Wyoming's my country, I reckon you know. This Braden was a deputy fer a while an' made a name fer himself!"

Braden hoped that Ronat didn't know the significance of the sobriquet "Trey."

A third man cut in, "Say, what we goin' to do about these cows? If Braden gits outa this valley—"

"He ain't goin' to try to git out!" Hulse promised harshly. "We got a guard at the pass, an' it's a cinch he ain't goin' to climb them peaks to get down on the prairie. Thet'd be a week's job!"

"Besides, he ain't likely to want to leave anyway!" Hulse added, after a moment's silence.

"How d'you figger thet, Crin?"

Evidently Hulse indicated with a motion of his hand. Braden heard Ronat drawl, "Wall, you shore look nice an' pretty, sweetheart! But be careful yuh don't scratch my hands again!"

Marion! She was in the cabin. Braden's pulse leaped. He leaned closer. He hoped for some word from Dorham, but none came and Braden concluded that the renegade sheriff was elsewhere.

"Best thing we can do right now," Ronat was saying, "Is collect the boys an' head out fer thet last herd of the Hunt outfit. Braden gummed things last night, but he won't be present tonight. We'll rustle jest after dawn, soon's we get there. We can make it by dawn if we ride hard. We'll leave a couple of the boys here, one to keep Braden on the run an' one to watch the girl!"

"Reckon it's best!" Hulse returned, "Then we'll get the whole outfit headed west an' jest disappear from this neck of the country. Reckon there'll be considerable in the way of puzzled hombres behind, tryin' to figger where the Hunt herd disappeared to. Yeh, an' where Marion Hunt went to!"

"Don't forget — we agreed the girl goes with me!" Ronat warned.

"Shore! Shore! All I want is a straight crack at thet Trey Braden! I aim to blow his heart right outa him!"

"Wall, let's ride. We'll slip out so's Braden can't know we've gone. An' then he'll lay low, figgerin' we're all after him. An' Reddy, here, can guard the girl! Able to do it, Reddy?"

"It's jest a pleasure, boss!"

They tramped out then, Hulse in the lead, Ronat behind—and trailing Ronat a limping man. Dorham! He walked as if dead. Braden's hand went to his gun, but the surprise of the sheriff's appearance rooted him to the spot. The trio passed into the night.

Braden wiped sweat from his face. Step'n-a-half Dorham—his old partner —turned outlaw! He sickened again. Then resolutely he pulled himself together. There was work to be done.

He waited for half an hour. Then, very gently, he began to press the door open. It swung back a crack. Braden glimpsed Marion inside, collapsed upon a bunk; and on a three-legged stool the man designated as Reddy. He was rolling a cigarette with intense preoccupation. But he heard the moving hinges.

He swung off the stool and came upright.

"Braden!" he ejaculated, in manifest surprise.

Braden slammed the door behind him and plunged forward. He dared not risk a shot, not while Hulse and Ronat and their men might be within earshot of a gun report. Silently as a cougar he drove ahead.

HIS tall body straightened like an arrow and charged at Reddy's middle. The man crashed back against the wall, his breath bursting from him violently. His half-drawn gun fell from his fingers.

But instantly he recovered himself. He snarled. He lashed out. Braden dragged up one of his guns, swung the muzzle into his fingers, and used the butt-end as a club. Reddy's right fist took him on the point of the chin, and he swung away for an instant dazed. When his head cleared he saw Reddy charging forward with a knife he had plucked from somewhere in his belt.

"You'll taste this!" he threatened.

But Trey Braden ducked the gleaming blade. The butt of his Colt smashed out against the man's head, and he plunged forward to roll against Braden's boots. Braden jerked his feet free. He bent down.

"Is—is he dead?" Marion asked.

"Reckon not. Jest laid out. But he'll be cold fer a long time!"

"Trey, I'm glad you came! I was afraid that they'd hunt you down and shoot you! Hulse is a beast! And this Ronat—he's worse than Hulse, if that's possible!"

"What about Step'n-a-half Dorham? He was in here. What did he say?" Braden asked.

"Trey, all he did was stare at me! He looks—well, he looks like a dead man walking! He didn't seem to recognize me. All the time he was in here, he just sat and stared at a corner—and obeyed whatever Ronat told him!"

"So he does what Ronat tells him!" Braden mused.

"He looks terrible, Trey! I was almost sorry for him, although I hate him for rustling my cattle! He looks—well, as I said, just like a dead man!"

A dead man! That had been Braden's impression when his old partner had passed him at the door half an hour ago.

But the significant fact was that Dorham obeyed Ronat, the man who had sworn to kill him. The mystery of this all deepened. A frown appeared on Braden's otherwise emotionless face.

V

"WE got to get out of here!" he decided, "An' we can't do that without horses. I reckon we better hide out in the brush until dawn, an' then try to locate a couple of nags. There'll be a guard at the pass, but he's the only man here. Rest have gone to rustle yore last herd, Marion. I reckon you heard 'em plan. They won't be back until tomorrow night, anyway, an' mebby not until midnight. We'll have plenty of time to look around."

"What about—him?" She indicated the unconscious Reddy.

"Mebby we better tie him up! We—"

"What's that?"

There was a stir outside the door, a scraping of the willows that wasn't caused by the wind. Braden spun, hands dropping to his guns. But he was too late. The door crashed open. Outlined against the blackness of the night Crin Hulse stood, a glittering Colt in his right palm. Behind him, Ronat peered over his shoulder. The man's glassy, glittering eyes seared into Braden.

"Wall, look who's here!" Hulse jeered, "Ronat, it's plumb lucky we fergot to load up our cartridge belts an' had to come back fer shells! I reckon Braden there heard us go, even sneakin' out like we did!"

Just the two of them there, Hulse and Ronat. Braden felt relieved. Evidently they'd permitted the rest of the outlaws to ride on, while they alone had returned for ammunition. Crin Hulse stomped into the cabin. He laughed, unpleasantly.

"Wall, Braden, I reckon I'm meetin' up with you the way I figgered to! Now, reach down easy like an' unbuckle yore gun belt! An' don't make a threatenin' move! If you do I'll fill you full of lead an' they'll need a derrick to put you in yore grave!"

Braden's fingers dropped to his belt, fumbled with the steel buckle. For an

instant his fingers clutched convulsively about the hard leather and the harder cylinders of metal, then he felt the weight of the two guns fall away. Cartridge belt and Colts clattered to the floor.

"Thet's better!" Hulse ejaculated, "I reckon yo're dangerous with them guns. But you ain't so dangerous without 'em!"

"What you aim to do?" Braden asked steadily.

"Wall, when I caught you today I figgered you could be used to help shove these cows over west, where we're aimin' to send 'em. We need plenty of help. An' then I figgered to settle a little quarrel I had with you. But yo're too slippery, Braden! So—"

"So I'm not leavin' this cabin alive tonight!"

"You took the words outa my mouth!" Hulse boomed.

Ronat came forward, his eyes fixed upon the recumbent form of Reddy. He growled something under his breath, lifted a bucket of water which stood near the door, and dashed half the contents over the unconscious man's face. There was an answering grunt and stir from Reddy.

"Get up, you blunderin' idiot!" Ronat said.

Reddy staggered to his feet. He massaged his head with his palms.

"Honest, boss, I didn't have a chance! I was jest sittin' here an' smokin', an' he come sneakin' in—"

"Wall, things turned out all right, but yore dreamin' when Trey Braden was sneakin' around might have caused a lot of trouble!"

Ronat's voice was harsh. Braden glimpsed then the merciless force of the man, that shone so vividly from the gleaming eyes. Two of a kind, Ronat and Hulse. Braden's flesh chilled. He took a step forward. He didn't know what to do. The odds were overwhelming; ordinarily he'd have fought at once, but there was Marion to consider.

Then, his eyes turned to the open door, he stiffened. Into the room came a man who, but for the fact of his motion, might have been a corpse. Step'n-a-half Dorham! He dragged his short leg painfully over the doorstep and hunched into the lantern light. His eyes were on the floor. He didn't look up. Beneath his beard his skin glowed with an ashy hue.

"Dorham!" Braden ejaculated.

The sound seemed to cut into the sheriff's preoccupation. His look swung up, fixed upon Braden. A terrible change went over him; life seemed to flow into him. His mouth opened, manifestly for utterance, but before a word could come Ronat's fist had crashed it shut. Dorham collapsed where he stood. He seemed weak as water.

"Dorham, keep outa this!" Ronat gritted, "Or you'll git what's comin' to you! Savvy? Can you hear me?"

"I—heard yuh!"

A voice from a ghost, Braden thought. He stepped back, until he stood alongside Marion. The three outlaws for an instant had their attention fixed upon Dorham, and in the moment Braden whispered, "Sneak fer the door! An' when I speak to you, run!"

He put all the urgency he could into his tones. Marion nodded. Presently she wandered toward the door. At once, Hulse challenged her.

"Where you aimin' to go sweetheart?"

Braden's right hand felt along his shirt, loosed a button over his chest. He said casually, "Aw, don't talk to the girl like thet?"

"Keep yore trap shut!"

Hulse's gun had dropped; it pointed to the floor. Ronat's and Reddy's were in their holsters. Braden tensed. Now!

He said loudly, "Marion, yuh wanted to know why they call me 'Trey.' This is why! Rush fer it!" He screamed out the last words. Marion darted out into the night. Braden's right hand plunged into his shirt, came out clutching the third weapon which had given him his name.

"Look out!" screeched Hulse.

HIS gun flung up. Golden flame spread from it. Braden fired—twice. Crin Hulse suddenly leaned back against the wall; one hand went to his throat, to claw there as if attempting to tear away some invisible noose that strangled him. Muffled sound gurgled from him. His gun dropped from fingers suddenly nerveless. Then he followed it, sprawling face down in the pool of water that had been thrown over Reddy to bring him to consciousness. Red oozed out from his chest to gloss the water over. In the dim lantern-light

that crimson scum gleamed wickedly.

"I'll pay you back fer thet lick on my head!" Reddy screamed.

His gun was out. He attempted to straighten, with the purpose of steadying his aim. But his foot slipped in the blood and water, and he floundered for the space of a split second. His bullet went low. It quivered into the wall close to Braden; the Wyoming man could feel the shock of it.

Then Braden's gun spoke. He fired deliberately, coolly, with no quiver of nervous muscles or fear. He saw Reddy jerk back, as if a hand had come up from behind to shock him with irresistible force to the rear and down. He was hit dead center. Braden was sure of that. His trigger finger froze in death. He was wholly dead before he collapsed across Crin Hulse. The red ooze from his shirt went out to stain the damp pool even more crimson.

"Two of 'em!" Braden thought. His mind worked like lightning. It had to work like lightning when things happened in the split hundredths of a second. He saw Ronat, a thin smile on his lips, spreading flame before him. Ronat's face was the face of a killer. And he was cool. He planted himself solidly, jerked the trigger with deliberation but lightning speed. In the narrow space that separated the two men it seemed as if he couldn't miss.

He wouldn't have, except for Step'n-a-half Dorham. The man, lying on the floor, suddenly raised himself to his hips. His hands swept around in a wandering movement. They fixed upon Ronat's boots; they jerked. And the outlaw's aim was disturbed. The next instant Braden's bullet had thrust home.

Ronat uttered a short, barking laugh. He died hard, trailing fire to the floor with him, his index finger tightening and loosening spasmodically against the trigger even after the gun was empty. Then he died.

Braden dived for Reddy's gun. He lifted it and backed away. His own weapon was empty. He waited intently, but minutes ticked by and proved that all three of the men were dead.

At once he went to Dorham, to bend over the sheriff who now had fallen back unconscious. Braden bent over him, stared at the pupils of his eyes. He called thru the door, "Marion!"

The girl entered instantly; evidently she'd remained just outside the wall. Her look at the trio of dead men was one of relief.

"Wall, thet's the end of them!" Braden said briefly, "An' now we got to ride! Dorham here is in a bad way. I reckon there's horses out here. We got to watch ourselves until we get thru the pass, but after that it'll be easy sailin'. I don't reckon the rest of the outlaws were close enough to hear these shots, but we can duck 'em easy enough anyway if we watch!"

"What's wrong with Dorham? I—"

"He's a sick man, Marion. I know you hate him, because he rustled yore cattle, but I reckon thet can be all explained. Right now we got to ride! We got to get him to a doc, an' I got to collect some boys to raid this outlaw hangout!"

Two days later Braden met Marion. From the west poured a herd of cattle. Braden motioned wearily, for he had been out of the saddle scarcely a whole hour in the last thirty-six.

"Wall, there's yore cattle, Marion. The Hunt herd is back again!"

"And Dorham?" Marion asked.

Braden rested one knee across the horn of his saddle. "Thet Ronat was a clever cuss!" he said, "An' bad as they come. Dorham sent him up fer life fer murder. Ronat swore revenge. But he was clever, an' planned hard. He an' Hulse were pals, an' first off when he broke out he run to Hulse fer cover.

"Wall, Hulse was rustlin' yore cows. Then he an' Ronat hatched up a plot to make a big killin' by rustlin' all yore herds. An' he didn't forget his revenge, but he saw a way he could use Dorham when Dorham set out on a still-hunt fer the rustlers of yore cattle. He didn't say who he was huntin' for, but it was them rustlers. Thet idea of herd disapperin' so slick when it should have been around plumb worried him.

"Ronat got hold of him, an' used him, figgerin' thet he an' Hulse were safe enough as long as Dorham was missin'. They knew the deputies'd lay off as long as they figgered the sheriff was doin' the huntin'. An' to make things plumb safe, Ronat planned to have Dorham ride with him. Then if he an' Hulse were seen, especially Hulse, the sheriff bein' there would make people think he was

punchin' fer them outlaws jest to get the goods on them. Marion, you were the only one who saw Dorham, as it happened an' the deputies were plumb skeptical anyway on account of yore herd disappearin' so mysterious, so Dorham's presence didn't really help the outlaws any.

"Hulse found the pass, I reckon, an' thet night drew the map to show some of the outlaws how to find the valley where they was cachin' the herds!"

"But Dorham?" Marion said.

"Ronat was clever. He shot Dorham full of dope, an' that shattered his nerve. Dorham must have near died, an' prob'ly Ronat beat him so thet he'd do what Ronat said. In his right mind, he'd prob'ly have died before doin' what Ronat said, but the dope weakened his brain until he didn't know if he was alive or not. He's still ravin' mad at the hospital in town, but the doc figgers he'll pull thru all right!"

Braden swung wearily out of the saddle. Steers were beginning to stream into the corrals, to have their burned brands replaced by the original mark of ownership.

"Wall, all yore cattle are back, from thet stampede pass!" Trey Braden remarked.

"You mean, our cattle!" Marion corrected.

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CHAPTER I

Farewell

ON a rise in the road Don Fraser checked his horse, turned in the saddle, and looked back. He could see the ranch house, gray from the weather of many years, leaning just a little in its old age, yet sturdy with a long stretch of sheltering life remaining to it. Beyond the house his eyes traveled over the alfalfa fields, just mowed for the second time. Beyond the fields those swift eyes took in the flats and then the hills which lifted themselves into mountains, some brown, some tree-clad against the horizon. The sky which rose from the peaks was sun-drenched by the climbing, brassy orb.

This had been home to Don Fraser through all his twenty-nine years—and he was leaving it. He had been born in that house. He had spent his boyhood, his youth, and his young manhood in it. Now he was to be a stranger to it.

If ever a man had had a rightful inheritance, this house and all the land about it, should have been his inheritance. His father had built that house. He had brought his wife, Don's mother, to it. She had been a gentle woman, and she had slipped gently out of life when Don was only five years old. His father had devotedly loved the boy,

but he had been a busy man, and Don had brought himself up under the careless eye of the cook.

WHEN he was eight his father had brought home a new wife. He had rather shamefacedly presented Don to her, and he had made the mistake of not taking the boy aside and explaining matters to him. Don had looked askance at his new mother. He had seen his father meekly take a tongue lashing from her. That bred a certain, definite feeling in Don about women. A man must accept whatever punishment a woman saw fit to inflict on him. He must not rebel against any medicine, however bitter, which she saw fit to give him.

Don was eighteen and his half brother was ten when Don first noticed a change in his father. He suddenly became aware that his father's hair had grayed and his shoulders had stooped. His eyes were not so keen as they had been.

So Don went to him and offered to take the burden of the ranch from his shoulders. The father had gladly slipped the burden to Don. Unknown to Don, he had been watching the boy and speculating about his ability. He had seen that he had no rider who could compare to Don. He had seen that Don could cast a rope with the best of them. He could handle a gun. Most important of all, Don seemed not to be afraid of anything. The father said that fear was not in the son.

Don had given no thought as to how

Desperately outnumbered by a bushwhacking brigade, a strong brother and a weak struggled to save a stolen ranch

his stepmother would take this shift in authority. He observed that she was watching him, but when the stepbrother was near by her glance went from Don to the younger boy. There was something unfathomable in her eyes then.

Then his father died, quite suddenly, in his chair, after supper, his pipe in his hand. After the funeral Don had gone about his business again. He knew nothing of legal technicalities. He supposed the ranch was his. His mother broke the news to him and told him he could verify it by consulting a certain lawyer at the county seat. Nothing, Don asked, was his? Nothing was his, his stepmother announced. And she added:

"I s'pose you are quittin'. I s'pose you are goin' to leave your father's wife to shift for herself with a nineteen-year-old boy on her hands."

Don was proud but he was not haughty. He was not selfish. He had never had a dream of riches. He had simply gone on working from year to year, taking things as they came. He was stung by his stepmother's imputation.

"I'm stayin' on," he said. "I'll do the best I can for you an' Robert."

That "Robert" perhaps indicated the status of the young stepbrother. It had never been shortened to "Bob," an unheard of thing. Mrs. Fraser would not permit the shortening. She had tongue-lashed the one puncher who had attempted it. Nor did Don reflect that Robert was no longer a boy. At Robert's age Don had been a full-fledged man in the saddle.

At his reply the stepmother had smiled, enigmatically. Don could not read the meaning in enigmatic smiles. He went about his business. He worked harder than ever. The ranch prospered in the next two years as it had never prospered before.

And then the stepmother had died, a month before this morning on which Don sat his horse on the rise. When the lawyer came and told Don that his stepmother had willed the ranch and everything appertaining thereunto to Robert, Don had squared his shoulders like a man who takes a blow standing solidly on his feet.

"I'm ridin'," he told the lawyer.

"Quitting?" the legal gentleman sneered.

Don, on occasion, had a direct and challenging gray eye. He regarded the lawyer coldly now.

"When you call me a quitter, you are ready to back it up, are you?" he asked softly.

This was a man-to-man matter. There was no woman in it. Don had learned how to handle man-to-man matters.

"Oh," said the lawyer hastily, "no. I meant that I hoped you wouldn't leave."

Don turned his back on him, and the lawyer went his way. Don sought out Robert and told him he would be riding in one week from that day. Robert looked at him fearfully.

These two were in marked contrast as they faced each other. Don had long ago come to a man's full physical estate. He had come to it powerfully, too. He was broad of shoulder and lean of thigh. Youth still bloomed in his face. His blood was thoroughly oxygenated, and that blood bloomed redly in his cheeks, lying thickly under his tan. His gray eyes were clear and generally cool. Only when he was unusually thoughtful did that coolness die out of them. Then they were somewhat somber; for there were a good many things which Don did not understand. This little blur in his mind did not affect him physically, however. Physically he was as nearly perfect as a man ever is.

Robert was slender and half a head shorter than Bob. His mother had sheltered him and he was rugged neither in mind nor in body. When he rode, he rode a horse which had definitely been gentled. He did try to practice with a rope, but he roped a post oftener than he roped a speeding steer. He was shy of firearms. He had his mother's dark eyes; and the sharpness of her features became a kind of delicacy in his. He had her soft blond hair, too. In another environment, differently reared, he might have been a "nice" boy. Here he was out of his element.

"But, Don, what am I going to do?" he asked now.

"Oh, you'll get along," Don answered. "You just leave things to ol' Bunn. He will look out for 'em for you."

"I wish you'd stay," Robert said.

Don was vaguely sorry for him. He realized that he had been vaguely sorry

for him all along. That uncertain feeling made him uncomfortable.

"I got to be strikin' out for myself, Robert," he said. "I'm twenty-nine. When a man turns into his thirties, he is gettin' along, you know."

"You going far?" Robert asked.

"Dunno. I'm ridin'. I'll see what's around the corner."

So he had ridden away, his horse beneath him, his saddle roll behind him.

HE had glowed a little at the thought of riding into new country and seeing what was there, but the glow did not last. As a shadow over the sun dims sunshine, so a shadow dimmed that glow. Yes, he was free. He was free of Bess Graham, but there was no joy in that. Bess Graham had become the one girl in his life as his father had been the one man. She lived down the mountains ten miles. Her father and Don's father had been close friends. Don and Bess had known each other for years. Don often went to Graham's with his father and later alone. Bess often came to the Fraser ranch with her father and once in a while alone. There was no engagement between her and Don, but there was something stronger than a formal engagement, Don felt. It was a kind of bond. They were so at ease when they were alone, and Don had never been at ease with any other girl or woman. He had given a good deal of thought as to how he was going to forge ahead, so that sometime he could marry Bess. He had not forged ahead. He was now twenty-nine and practically penniless. Bess was twenty-one, an only child; and her father had one of the best ranches.

Don had seen Bess shortly after his father had died. Bitterness was in his soul.

"You heard the news, didn't you?" he asked. "I'm no better off than the poorest puncher. I reckon I won't be ridin' over your way no more."

He had never thought Bess meek. In fact Bess was pretty spirited. As he looked up at her he saw her lips curl.

"Who asked you to?" she demanded.

Well, he didn't blame her. Marriage between them was impossible now anyhow. He couldn't ask to marry him a girl who would have a lot of land, a great many cattle, money in the bank.

And so he had not ridden over to the Graham ranch, and Bess had not ridden over to the Fraser place.

Ho, hum, he could not sit here forever, looking back at what was not his. He must be riding on. Damn it, he would have a whirl at the big outside world. Maybe he would raise some hell.

CHAPTER II

Two Men, Two Girls

HE rode for two miles and came round the shoulder of a squat hill. He was not aware that he was coming on anyone till he saw a man and a girl in the narrow road before him. He knew the man, though he had never passed a word with him. The girl he thought he did not know, though there was something familiar about her.

The man was squat and he was unkempt. His face had a swarthy appearance, but that was not natural to it. It was the face of a man who rode much in sand and washed little. There was a stubble of beard on the face, and a brown mustache sprouted raggedly from the upper lip. The man had a cast in one eye, and though his regard was bent on the girl, it seemed to Don that he had an eye on himself also. He was roughly dressed in faded overalls, run-down boots, blue shirt, nondescript vest, and regulation hat. His horse was a grayish brown, a color which, especially at a distance, could merge with almost any landscape.

Don knew him by reputation. He was said to be a kind of cattle rustler. There was little chance in this country for the rustling of steers. An animal with a blotted brand could not be got out of the country, but more than one ranchman in the last two years had been surprised at the scantiness of his calf crop. There was a report that this Renshaw was a hole-in-the-wall fellow, who had a hide-out in the mountains. He was reputed to have half a dozen followers. They never appeared in town. A further report was to the effect that Renshaw was secretly building up a herd from the calves he stole.

The girl whom Renshaw now confronted was as different from him as any girl could be from any man. She was smartly garbed, and her black horse had

a polished coat. She was bareheaded, and Don saw that her hair was as dark and as sleek as the horse's. As he stopped his horse, she turned toward him, and Renshaw's glance followed hers. The girl's cheeks, Don saw, were flushed and her eyes were bright. Flush and brilliance, he believed, were only signs of anger. When Renshaw saw Don sitting his horse there in silence, Renshaw's lips curled. His eyes, however, had a questioning look.

Don easily perceived that something had happened between the man and the girl.

"Ride up here," she ordered Don.

Don rode up to her. Because her tone had been so imperious there was a thin smile on his lips.

"This man has been bothering me," the girl said. "He stopped me in the road here and asked me who I was and where I had come from. If I'd had a gun or a quirt—"

She stopped and blazed a look at Renshaw.

"Oh, now, I—" Renshaw began.

Don looked at the girl, his head a little inclined.

"Go on," she said, nodding curtly.

Don looked at Renshaw.

"Shut up," he said.

"I—" Renshaw again.

"He kinda held you up, ma'am?" Don asked the girl.

"Overtook me. Wheeled his horse. I couldn't pass him."

Don realized that it didn't make a bit of difference to himself or to anybody else what he did. He could have a fight with Renshaw and, so far as he could see, there would be nothing to pay except possibly another fight later on.

HE permitted himself a chuckle over the situation. Damned if there wasn't something to this matter of being a fella's own man. He was answerable to no one, to nothing.

Renshaw apparently misunderstood that chuckle. A grin wreathed his ugly, tobacco-stained lips.

"Thass it, Don," he said. "Just a joke. Fella likes his fun now an' then, y' know."

Don put heel to horse and wheeled the animal alongside Renshaw's. It was a snappy movement, and the only move Renshaw made to defend himself was to throw up an arm. That was excellent for Don. He merely seized the arm and pulled his horse back and around. Renshaw was dragged from his saddle. Don threw him to the ground. Renshaw landed on his back, and he lay there between the two horses with his face uplifted to Don's. Fury glowed in Renshaw's face briefly. The look died when Don threw a leg over the horn and seemed about to jump down. If he jumped he would land squarely on the fallen man. Again Renshaw threw up an arm.

"Don't you do it," he yelled. "I ain't done nothin' to you."

"Don't look at me like that, then," Don ordered, resuming his seat. "Get up."

Renshaw scrambled to his feet and backed over to his own horse. He kept his eyes steadily and now fearfully on Don's face.

"Whatcha want?" he mumbled.

"Me?" Don said. "Nothin'." He turned with a kind of mock deference to the girl. "It's for you to say, ma'am," he added.

He expected she would tell him to order Renshaw to ride on. He thought she would want Renshaw to be got out of her sight as quickly as possible. She proved, however, to be an exacting young lady.

"Have him apologize," she said.

"If you got an apology in your system, let's have it, Renshaw," Don said.

"How d'yuh know me?" Renshaw asked. "I ain't never bothered you none."

"Why, you cussed rustler, everybody knows you," Don stated.

It was a loose statement, without real foundation so far as Don knew, but apparently it was not a statement which Renshaw relished.

"Rustler?" Renshaw repeated, his face mottled by various emotions. "You'll find out."

"Prob'ly. Well, I've asked for an apology. I've asked once and that's once too many times."

Renshaw looked at the girl and made a thumb and finger gesture toward his hat.

"I didn't mean to bother yuh none, ma'am," he said. "I was jest foolin'."

The girl sat looking at him stonily. She would not speak to him. Nor would

she suggest anything to Don. Haughty, by gosh. She believed in putting up the bars and keeping them up. Don thought he knew what she wanted now.

"Hop your horse and ride, fella," he ordered.

Renshaw mounted his horse and disappeared around the hill. The girl turned to Don.

"I'm glad you happened along, Mr. Fraser," she said.

She certainly could gentle herself all of a sudden. A moment ago she had been kinda domineering. Now she was quietly feminine. And there was a vastly different look in her eyes. Don would have been a fool if he had not known that that look held a touch of admiration. It embarrassed him. He was a one-girl man. There would never be a girl in this world for him except Bess Graham.

"You know me?" he asked, merely to say something.

"Why, certainly," she answered. "I was on my way over to your house to see you."

"See me?"

"Why, yes. I'm Jean Lacy."

Oh, gosh, yes. No wonder he had thought there was something familiar about her. Ol' Pete Lacy's daughter, eh? Pete Lacy was the wealthiest ranchman hereabouts. He was a rough old fellow, fiery, contemptuous of anything which had the appearance even of being soft. And so he was just the kind of man to want his daughter to have whatever graces education could give her. He had sent her into the East to school four years ago.

"Oh, yes, ma'am," Don said. "I know who you are."

"You didn't know when you first came up here," she stated.

"Didn't I?" he asked.

She ignored his question. She had made her statement, and she seemed content to let it ride.

"I am glad for more reasons than one that you came along," she told him. "In the first place you saved me from annoyance, and in the second you proved yourself to be exactly the kind of a man my father thinks you."

The kind of man Old Lacy thought him? Why, he hadn't supposed Lacy had ever given him one serious thought.

"My father wants to see you," she said. "Will you ride back with me?"

"What does he want to see me about?" Don asked cautiously.

"I don't know. There seems to be trouble brewing. Father and I were alone at the house and he didn't want to leave. There has been some night-riding for the last week or so."

"Cows driftin'?" Don asked.

"Um-m. Perhaps that was it. Will you go with me?"

A sense of freedom was one thing. Lack of money was another. Don had known that he would have to have a job from time to time. A man couldn't live on mountain air. Why, yes, he would as soon work for Lacy for a while. Lacy would have to put up his wages, though. He said he would ride with the girl.

"You are free, aren't you?" she asked. "You have left your brother's ranch."

His brother's ranch! The news had traveled fast. The girl seemed to see the look of resentment that traveled over his face.

"Well, I shouldn't have said it that way," she apologized. "I was repeating what my father said, I suppose. We had heard that you had been disinherited."

"I don't expect a man is disinherited long as he has two hands and a horse," Don said stiffly.

There was a sudden glow in her eyes. Education hadn't robbed her of impulses which had been hers before she had gone East. She was still of the West, though how much she perhaps did not know.

"If I went home without you and told my father that, I'm afraid he would say things to me," she declared.

"You'd prob'ly have something to say on your own account," he grinned.

"Maybe," she laughed. "Well, let's get along."

They turned their horses and threaded their way among the hills. They were rounding a hill, as Don had rounded another a while back, when they came face to face with another girl on a horse. She was a smaller girl than Jean. "Tawny" fitted her. Her hair was yellow-brown, and the sun's dull flush was in her cheeks. She had wide gray eyes, eyes usually very steady, very cool, the eyes of a person not easily shaken.

She must have been a little shaken now, however. A cloud came into those

lovely eyes—and passed, leaving them colder than Don had ever seen them before. She nodded just perceptibly to Don and inclined her head to Jean.

"Hello, Bess," Jean said.

"Fine day," said Bess Graham, and spurred her horse past Don's so closely that their stirrups almost touched.

DON opened his lips to speak, closed them again. Bess had passed around the hill. Don felt Jean's eyes on his face questioningly. Damn it, he supposed what he was feeling his face disclosed.

"Well, let's be getting along," he grated.

Jean made no comment on the encounter, but as they rode at a lope he could feel her eyes on him from time to time. They came at last to the Lacy ranchhouse and Lacy himself stepped out to meet them.

"We'll put up the horses and then I want to talk to you," Lacy said.

Jean and Don dismounted and the two men turned the horses into a corral. Jean had come along with them. Don faced the older man after the bars had been put up.

Lacy was an old-timer, perhaps fifty-five years of age. He was a grizzled old fellow, sun and wind bitten. He had a grim mouth, which a smile seldom touched, and his eyes were a hard blue, their sight undimmed by long years of gazing into distances.

"I hear you're free," Lacy said.

"I'm out of a job temporary," Don agreed.

'Well, I ain't goin' to offer you no sympathy on account of you losin' your ranch," Lacy said. "The ranch should have been yours by rights. You pretty near earned it the last few years. I been watchin' you. Fact is, I been watchin' you for a long time. I've heard talk about you, too. You can handle a gun, can't you?"

"Yes."

"I mean fast. You can place a bullet."

"Yes."

"Not so many can do it nowadays," Lacy said. "Well, I'm lookin' to hire your gun, a coupla them for that matter."

"You can't do it," Don said decidedly. "What do you think I am, a gunman for hire?"

"Hold your bronc down on his four feet," Lacy said testily. "If I wanted somebody killed, I would go out an' do it myself. I still could. Have you lost any calves?"

"Not one that I know about. I've always kept a close check."

"I know," Lacy nodded. "You could do it with a small outfit. Well, I ain't lost none till lately. Other day I come on five carcasses. They had been skinned. Looked like somebody had wanted some hides an' some meat. I don't reckon they stopped at five. I have had men ridin' for some time now, but, damn it, they don't seem to get nowhere. You are a young fella with a head on your shoulders. I got ten men to place at your disposal. Will you head them and find out who has been tamperin' with my cows?"

"You've heard the talk about Renshaw, haven't you?"

"Yes, but I don't listen to no talk. I don't want you to. I want you to start with an open mind. When you get the goods on somebody, I don't want you to be makin' no mistake about it. Will you take the job?"

"At a hundred a month," said Don coldly. "An' you ain't hirin' my gun. You are hirin' me. I get a free hand."

"Which is talk," said Lacy. "You begin now?"

"I'm here."

"I'll have the cook rustle some grub for you an' then we will ride."

He went into the house. Jean had been standing by while the deal had been made. She now turned to Don.

"I was afraid you might mention our encounter with Renshaw," she said.

"You been away from here for some time," he said.

"Renshaw didn't say anything worse than that," she snapped.

"The truth never hurt nobody."

"I'll leave you," she said. "You'll have a lot to do to get ready. You'll want to oil your—"

He knew somehow that she had been going to say "your hired gun." He looked into her eyes coldly.

"—your gun," she finished.

"That's better," he told her.

She fled to the house. He thought she was stirred up some. For himself his pulse had not quickened a single beat.

CHAPTER III

Innocence

DON and Lacy came to the edge of the mountains. They had passed through the hills and had crossed a valley. Don suddenly stopped his horse.

"Somebody's comin'," he said.

"Young ears," said Lacy. "I had 'em once."

Half a dozen men, mounted, came into view, issuing in single file from a draw. Don let his head fall, but he regarded the men closely from beneath his hat brim. He saw that four of them were typical men of the country, hardworking, rather sober-faced fellows. He dismissed them from his mind at once. His interest was held by the other two, however. He knew them at once for tramps of the cattle country. They were ill-favored, poorly dressed. Somehow they reminded him of Renshaw.

"Where'd you get them two fellas?" he asked Lacy. "Make it snappy. They're comin' up."

"Hired 'em last spring," Lacy replied. "Goin' to let 'em go next week. Had to have 'em in the rush season. Not much account."

"Keep 'em on," Don directed. "I want to get acquainted with 'em."

"All right."

The men rode up to Lacy and Don, spreading out their horses, so that they were ranged in front of the two men.

"Boys," Lacy said, "I have hired Don Fraser to take charge of this hunt. He is a good man. Whatever orders he gives will be the same as if they come from me. Understand?"

The four punchers nodded. The other men looked at Don. One of them stirred in his saddle and then he stepped his horse forward, so that he was in front of the other men.

"Whatcha want us to do?" he asked.

Don ignored him, turning to Lacy.

"You might as well go back to the house, Mr. Lacy," he said. "We'll get busy. If anything turns up, I'll let you know."

"Why, I'm goin' along with you," Lacy protested. "I am old, but I ain't through complete. Mebbe I can be of some assistance to you."

"I'm runnin' things," Don said. "If I ain't somebody else is. You can take your choice."

"Oh, well," said Lacy with a shrug of his shoulders, and he turned his horse and rode away toward the house.

Don faced the man who had asked the question.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Caley."

"And yours?" Don asked the other man.

"Stevick."

"You look like you might have had some experience in this kind of business," Don said, with what might have passed for a deferential smile. "Have you found anything?"

As Don had expected, the first spokesman gulped the flattery. His thick lips drew back from his snaggy teeth.

"Why, we found one sign but we lost it again," he answered. "There wasn't nothin' we could pick up in the mountains, but down by a crick a mile or so over here we come on a sign. The crick runs east an' west. On the banks there was the marks of horses. The horses was drove into the stream and headed east."

"How do you know they was headed east?"

"Riders wasn't careful enough. 'Stead of goin' straight into the water, two of them turned their horses east just as the horses was about to leave the bank. Easy enough to read, wasn't it?"

"You did a good piece of work," Don said. "Did you ride along the creek bank?"

"For a ways but we didn't pick up nothin'. We was comin' back to see Lacy to get further orders."

DON looked away as if he were considering what the men had done. He had an instinctive distrust of these two men. They didn't look good to him. Yet he did not want them to feel that. He had seen the man take flattery once. He would discover how strong his appetite for it was. He beckoned him to one side.

"You look an' act like you had some

brains," Don said. "You know what Lacy is lookin' for, don't you?"

"He has been missin' some young stock, so he said."

"Yeah, an' I think it's the bunk," said Don. "Who's goin' to take a chance in runnin' off a bunch of calves? What would there be in it, considerin' the risk? I tell you, fella: I got somethin' to do besides runnin' wild through these mountains. I got a certain person I want to see. S'pose you ride around with the men till nightfall an' then I will come back. You can tell me if you have stumbled on anything."

"Shore," Caley agreed heartily. "I think it is wild goose stuff my own self. Where'll we meet you?"

"You got food out here?"

"Yeah. Up the draw. S'pose you come there?"

"Good enough."

Don wheeled his horse, waved his hand to the other men, and rode away. Glancing back, he saw the men file into the draw, Caley at the head of them. Don drew his horse down to a walk. Don continued to think of Renshaw in connection with this man.

When he came in sight of Lacy's house, he rode through the hills in the direction of his own house. He was crossing the road when unexpectedly a rider came out of the hills at about the spot where Don had encountered the girl and Renshaw. He was surprised to see it was Jean Lacy.

"I've been over to your place," she said.

"You knew I wasn't there."

"I could go there without looking for you, couldn't I? I wanted to see your brother."

"You know my brother?"

"Why, yes. I have met him in town several times since I came back. I don't think that will do him any harm, will it?"

"Why, no, ma'am," said Don gravely. "Looka here, Miss Lacy. I didn't mean to offend you. I didn't mean to snap you up."

Jean smiled suddenly.

"I'll tell you how that is," she said. "Since I came back, people have been looking at me as if I were a stranger. They seem to think that because I have been away to school that I am no longer one of them. I thought you were trying to high hat me."

"Why, Miss Lacy, I think you are a good game girl," he said. "I didn't have no feelin' that you was a stranger to this country."

"I'll tell you something, then," she went on. "Renshaw was at your brother's place when I went over there."

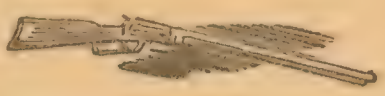
"How did that fella treat you this time?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, he didn't pay any attention to me. When I rode in there, he and your brother were sitting on the back steps. Renshaw was talking. What he said seemed to disturb your brother. I thought you might want to look into that."

"I got another matter to look into now," Don said. "I'll drop over there some time maybe and see Robert."

"Your feeling against your brother is pretty strong, is it?" she asked.

"Ma'am, it ain't! Course I don't like the idea of givin' up a place that has always been home to me. But that ain't my brother's fault. I on'y wish him luck."



HE made his statement soberly. His face was grave. There was the light of honesty in his eyes.

"I see," she nodded. "Well, I just thought I would tell you."

"My brother has been coddled some," Don said. "The ranch is now his. It will be better if he learns to stand on his own feet. He has got to learn that lesson some time."

"I suppose so," the girl said absently. "Well, I must be getting home. See you later."

When he came in sight of the Graham house he saw no one. He rode into the yard and dismounted and knocked on the kitchen door. Bess opened it. He judged that she had opened it absently, for she looked down at him with vacant eyes for a moment.

"Oh," she said at last, coldly.

"I was just lookin' for your father," Don explained uncomfortably.

"You'll find him at the far end of the alfalfa fields, fixing the fences," Bess said, and she closed the door.

Whew! Don felt exactly as he would have felt if she had slapped his face. She certainly was through with him. Resentment flooded up through him, and that bred a fierce, fighting mood in him. Damn it, Lacy had hired him to go up against a bunch of criminals. He would go up against them properly prepared. He stopped his horse, untied his saddle roll, and got out his belt and gun. He buckled the belt about his waist, pushed the gun down in the holster, and rode on.

He came presently to the line of fence of which Bess had spoken and rode along that. Soon he saw three men working on the fence. Bit o' luck! The two men with Graham were the men he was looking for. He rode up to them and stopped his horse.

Graham came erect from a stooping position. When he saw who his visitor was, his face darkened. Then his eyes went to the gun.

"What in hell are you comin' on my placed armed for?" he demanded.

"I'm workin' for Lacy," Don answered.

"You damned simpleton, take that gun off."

Don stared. He was sure that the sight of the gun had not roused this ire in Graham. There must be something more. Men wore guns now and then. There was nothing in the sight of a weapon to stir up Graham in this fashion.

"Why, no," Don said gravely. "I'm keepin' the gun right where she is."

"Get off my land, then—and stay off."

"I sure will an' it'll be a pleasure. I want to talk to McEwen an' Joslyn though."

"You can't," Graham snapped. "They're busy. They are workin' an' that is a hell of a sight more'n you are doin'. You've turned rambler, haven't you?"

"I've just told you I'm workin' for Lacy," Don answered, holding in his own rising anger. "Mac," he went on to McEwen, "I need you an' Jostlin'. I want you to jostle along with me."

"You in a jam?" Mac asked.

"Looks like it."

"I'll ride with you at dark," Mac said.

"Me, too," Joslyn added.

Graham stood staring from one man to the other for a moment. Then he swore vigorously.

"I'm glad you lost your ranch, Fraser," he declared. "I can see now that the reputation you had built up for yourself as a hard-workin', steady man was all froth. You been achin' to take the bit in your teeth for a long time. Now you are runnin' free, ain't you? Well, you can get to hell out of here and stay out. As for you two—" he turned on the punchers—"you can ride with him right this minute. You come on up to the house an' I will pay you off an' make sure you don't carry away with you anything that don't belong to you."

Their horses were grazing near by, and they mounted them. Graham took the lead and they followed him. The two punchers went into the bunkhouse and came out with saddle rolls. Their belongings were few. They rode light. Graham emerged from the house and handed them the money they had coming.

"Git!" he ordered.

The three men turned their horses.

"And you, gunman, don't come back here no more," Graham told Don. "Further'n that, don't ever speak to my daughter again."

Don thought he understood that. Graham knew he was poor now. When Graham had thought he would one day own the ranch, he had not frowned on the relationship of Bess and Don. His dismissal of Don must have Bess's sanction, too. He was astonished at Bess. He hadn't thought she was that kind.

The three loped along for a mile. Don saw that the two punchers were in high spirits. If there was to be a fight, they would stay with it to the finish.

Several hours remained between now and dark, and Don thought he might use that time to ride over and see his stepbrother. Renshaw's tongue might have loosened while he was talking to Robert.

The sun was dipping toward the west as they rode in toward the old house. They passed the side of it, and then Don suddenly stopped his horse. A man was sitting on the kitchen steps. He was not such a man as would ordinarily bring Don to a shocked halt. He wore no hat and his head was very bald. It was a brown, bony old head, and the face beneath it was thin with hollows in temples and cheeks. The eyes were beady, and

they fixed themselves on Don's face then went to his hanging gun.

"Where's my brother?" he asked quietly, endeavoring to keep any note of apprehension from his voice.

"So you're Don Fraser, are you?" the man asked.

"I'm Don Fraser."

THE beady eyes traveled over Don's body, over his horse, traveled from that animal to the other horses, traveled over the bodies of their riders. Slowly they came back to Don.

"Where's your brother?" the man repeated. "Why, he has went to town."

"When will he be back?"

"Not a-tall, fur as I know."

There must be some sort of joke in this, Don thought. The man had narrowed his eyes, and his lips were pursed. He looked as if he might smile in wintry fashion.

Don dismounted and walked up to him. The man kept his eyes on Don's face, raising the eyes as Don drew nearer to him.

"What's the joke?" Don demanded. "Why isn't my brother comin' back to his ranch?"

"*His* ranch?" the man asked. "Hell, he ain't got no ranch. He has sold out. I have bought this yere outfit, lock, stock 'n' bar'l. Your brother ain't comin' back because he is afraid of you, afraid you will be sore about his selling out and raise hell."

CHAPTER IV

Assassin's Bullet

DON and his two friends were approaching the spot at which Don was to meet Lacy's men. They had not ridden straight toward the place. Suspicion of those two disreputable drifters had grown in Don's mind. Disclosures which that odd old man who had bought the ranch had made had added still further to the suspicion. So Don had led the two men through the hills by another way. The meeting-place was only a quarter of a mile beyond, but the three men could creep up on it unobserved.

Don found that he had made no mistake in his choice of aides. Leaving the ranch house, he had told the men jokingly that he would pay them thirty-three dollars, thirty-three and a third cents a month, explaining that that would be their share of the hundred a month he was to get from Lacy. Mac had laughed.

"You needn't be p-tickler about the thirty-three dollars and thirty-three cents," he said. "Looks to us like you were in a jam. We will stand by you till you get the jam busted."

It looked to Don, too, as if he were in a jam. Not only had he lost the ranch which his father had once owned, but it had now passed into alien hands. He had demanded to know where the younger Renshaw was.

"I dunno where he is," Renshaw had said. "He will be here in doo time, h'ever. He is goin' to run the place. He has got some cattle of his own. I expect he will drive them over here."

"Where did he get cattle?" Don asked.

"Where did he get 'em? Why, where does a man get cattle? Raises 'em or buys 'em."

"I expect he will have a lot of young stock," Don hinted.

"Whatever stock he has will bear his brand," Renshaw declared.

"I don't doubt it," Don agreed. "Well, you tell your precious son that I will be over here to see him."

He and Mac and Joslyn had then left. They made no talk on their way into the hills. Don presently called a halt. They dismounted and let their reins drag. Don felt that he had got his mind in order so far as was possible with the information he had.

"Here's how she stacks up, boys," he said. "I figger that them two fellas that is workin' for Lacy is workin' for Renshaw, too. Mebbe that ol' timer back there is the brains of the party. That's generally the way, you know. Some guy with a little more brains than the others is the main squeeze in these crooked outfits. That ol' fella made me think of a spider. Mebbe he has been spinnin' a web all along.

"Looks to me like the younger Renshaw has been drivin' off young stock all the time he has been here. He could hold 'em together up in the mountains. This here game that them Renshaws are

playin' has been played before. They ain't the on'y ones that has started in life with a runnin' iron as their capital. They make a deal to buy a ranch that has been owned by decent people. They move onto it. They become decent themselves. They don't do a thing that anybody can take exception to. Meek an' mild will be their motto. Well, what you goin' to do about that?"

"Why, you gotta hit 'em below the belt before they get themselves all set on that ranch," Joslyn offered.

"Jostlin', your brains ain't all in your feet," Don said. " 'N' to hit 'em now is what I plan. It ain't you fellas' funeral, but it may be if you stick around."

"We will be interested to know whose funeral it will be," Mac declared.

And that was all of that. Don had given them a chance to withdraw if they liked, but they didn't like.

"All right," Don said. "Now we got to be cautious. Course it might be more fun not to be cautious, but it looks like there is too much at stake. You fellas folla me on foot. I will hop my horse and ride in there where them fellas is waitin'. You be ready for whatever happens."

HE hopped his horse and rode out of the hills till he came to a narrow valley. He went to the middle of this and rode along it slowly, so that the two other men, afoot, hugging the line of hills, could keep up with him.

Slowly, too, he rode into the draw. He saw at once that only five men were there. Caley was missing. Don knew that he must take his time about revealing that he had noticed Caley's absence. He must not let the remaining rambler know that he had especially singled out Caley or himself.

He dismounted and walked up to the punchers.

"Find anything, boys?" he asked generally.

One of the punchers looked at him soberly. He was not stupid but he was not especially bright. Don saw that he had been questioningly turning something over in his mind.

"We didn't find nothin'," he said. "How would you expect to find anything when you didn't look for it? We been loafin' ever since you went away."

The man who had called himself Stevick stepped forward.

"This boy don't know what we been doin'," he said. "Caley has been on a hunt. He will be showin' up here pretty soon, and I'm thinkin' he will have some noos."

"Where did Caley go?" Don asked.

"He didn't say. Caley is a kind of a lone-hander sometimes."

"Lone wolf, mebbe," Don suggested.

"Why, mebbe he is a wolf at that," the man retorted, and he looked Don steadily in the eyes.

Don knew that something had happened to freshen this fellow's courage. He was surer of himself than he had been that morning. Also he seemed to be careful. Still facing Don, he retreated from him till he came to the wall of a hill. Then he sat down with his back to the wall. This might, Don knew, be mere caution, but on the other hand it might be part of a plan. However, the man was not visibly wearing a gun, and Don let him sit there.

"You want something to eat?" the puncher who had criticized the hunt asked.

"Not now," Don answered. "We will wait for Caley."

He was apprised of Caley's arrival by the sound of his rusty voice from above. Don looked up. Caley's bare head was thrust out over the rim of the hill. A rifle was pointed slantingly down at Don.

"Tighten yorself an' reach," Caley ordered.

Don could only obey. He was not nonplussed by Caley's action. Caley had plotted but so had he. Mac and Joslyn were somewhere near by. However, he must not let Caley think he was complacent. Caley would want to gloat a little. He would expect Don to be angry. Don began to swear lightly, and he scowled up at Caley.

"Well, what did yuh think?" Caley jeered. "Did you think you could boss me an' Stevick? Reckon not! We chooses our own bosses. You ain't one of 'em. Boy, I got my finger on the trigger, an' she is balanced on a hair. Shall I pull her?"

Don could feel a tingle up his spine; his hair seemed to stir. Well if he had to take an assassin's bullet now, he would have to take it. The best he could do would be to take it standin' up.

"You dirty pup," he said, "pull her if that is the way you feel about it."

CALEY'S eyes flamed. He shifted the elbow which served as a rest. His hot eyes then went along the barrel. But he did not pull the trigger.

"Damn yuh," he said, "if I was runnin' the show, you would have called a good man a pup for the last time. But you wait. I won't shoot yuh when yuhr time comes. I will carve yuhr black heart out."

"Big talk," Don sneered.

Caley apparently had difficulty in controlling himself. Passion twisted his ugly face and the flame in his eyes reddened them. He sucked in a great breath through parted lips. As if he could not trust himself, he turned the rifle away from Don and pointed it in the general direction of the four punchers.

"You fellas line up there against the wall," he ordered. "Take 'em, Stevick."

With a nasty grin splitting his lips, Stevick rose and drew a gun from its hiding place beneath the waistband above his hip. He held the gun loosely in the puncher's direction.

"Keep yuhr eye on that fella Fraser, too," Caley instructed. "I'm comin' down there."

He paused for a moment, looking down. Don knew that this was the ideal moment in which Mac and Joslyn could hold him up, but there was no sharp command to Caley to that effect.

The man disappeared from the hilltop and in a moment reappeared, coming around the base of the hill. He walked directly up to Don and took his gun.

"Yuhr a hell of a leader, ain't yuh?" he demanded. "Yuh walked right into it."

"Mebbe I'll walk right out again," Don said coldly.

"Fella," Caley said, "yuhr life ain't worth the snap of my fingers. I'm tellin' yuh that straight. Only thing that gets me is that I won't have the pleasure of killin' yuh."

"Renshaw will do that, will he?" Don asked.

"Why, that ain't no secret now," Caley retorted. "Think I'm afraid to tell yuh. Yes, Renshaw will kill yuh. He will tear yuh apart."

"How about these four others boys?" Don asked. "Can't they ride?"

"Yuh fool," Caley snarled. "Course not! What we do with them will depend on how they act. They don't look to me like they would stand the gaff much."

Don was anxiously waiting for Mac and Joslyn to make a move. He was sure they would not long delay. They had had time enough to creep up on this scene. However, they would have had to be cautious and perhaps they would need a little more time. Standing as he was, his rifle butt resting on the ground, Caley was a fair target if by chance the two punchers climbed the hill which Caley had just left. Don would try to keep Caley standing there a while longer.

"You don't seem to have no secrets, Caley," he said. "Mebbe you don't think I know everything that is goin' on. Mebbe you don't think I have seen ol' man Renshaw."

"I expect yuh have if yuh have visited that ranch that was yours a while ago," Caley retorted icily.

"Your outfit has somehow defrauded my brother out of that ranch," Don stated.

"Ol' man Renshaw has bought that outfit. He can prove it in seven courts of law."

"He prob'ly bought it with a gun in his hand," Don took a chance shot.

That startled Caley. His jaw dropped a little and a look of suspicion came into his eyes.

"Yuh guess a hell of a lot, don't yuh?" he asked.

"I'm not guessin'," Don declared. "Why, fella, mebbe ol' Renshaw is already in jail."

Don saw that he had overshot the mark. Caley's jaw immediately tightened and then a grin loosened his lips.

"Who would have him arrested?" he asked.

"Why, if he held my brother up and took his ranch away from him, my brother would go to the sheriff or the prosecutor."

"Haw, haw," Caley exploded.

His merriment was so strong that he threw back his head. He took perhaps two seconds too long. His laughter ceased and he was about to straighten up. But he did not straighten up. There was an explosion from the top of the hill which Caley had just left. Don saw two fingers of Caley's clutching hand torn away. The rifle barrel was knocked

from his grasp and fell to the ground. With a howl Caley seized the wrist of the maimed hand and bent to clasp it tight. He had much ado to keep his feet. He swayed and then lurched like a drunken man.

There was at once another explosion and a bullet tore through Stevick's hat. Stevick had been standing with his gun-hand dropped. He seemed paralyzed with fear, so that he was unable to raise the hand even if he had had the courage to do so. His head on its short neck was jerked forward, as the head of a turtle comes out of the shell. His eyes were wide and his lips hung apart.

"Drop your gun, fella," came Mac's voice harshly. "Next bullet will plow clean through your gizzard."

So promptly did Stevick drop his gun that the puncher on the hill top might have pulled a string connected with it instead of giving an order. Mechanically, as if another string had been pulled, Stevick raised his hands. One of the punchers went over and picked up his gun. Mac and Joslyn rose on the hill-top.

"We're Lacy's men," the puncher said.

"Yeah, I can pick you," Mac said coolly. He looked down at Don and grinned. "Too bad to waste a bullet on that fella's hand, boss," he said, "but I didn't know just what you wanted. I got another bullet here, though, an' she is the kind of bullet that will go wherever you tell her. Like me to finish that little job?"

Don appeared to debate that. He knew that Mac would not kill Caley if he were told to do so, but he saw the wisdom of joining Mac in making these two tramps think so.

"Not yet, Mac," Don said. "We will let this fella bleed a little. He has got too much blood. Come on down."

In a moment Mac and Joslyn came around the base of the hill. They walked up to Caley.

"Fella," Mac said, "me an' you are a good deal alike. We pick our bosses. You picked yours an' we picked ours. We picked Fraser. You think he ain't much of a boss. That shows how stoopid you are."

Caley lifted a white, pain-filled face. His eyes were sick. He would not hesitate to maim or to kill another man, but the infliction of pain on himself was another matter.

"Ain't yuh gonna gimme some help with them fingers?" he pleaded. "Or are yuh goin' to lemme bleed to death? Them fingers is gone. My right hand, too. Oh, Gawd, I am busted complete."

"I'll say you are busted complete," Mac told him. "That's what you get for pickin' the wrong boss. As a picker you are the bunk."

Caley turned to Don now. All the fire had gone out of him.

"Fraser, help me," he humbly entreated.

"You'll have somethin' to tell us, will you?" Don asked.

"Don't ask me that. Ask me anything but that. I can't squeal. It'd be as much as my life was worth. Yuh don't know ol' man Renshaw. He is a devil. He has got ten more men behind him, men that won't stop at nothin'. They are hard as nails, men that never laugh. Me, I can laugh. I did a while ago. Fraser, don't ask me nothin'. I can't tell you nothin'. I'm afraid."

He was afraid. He was terror-stricken. And he was suffering physical pain.

"If yuh don't help me, I reckon I can lay down an' die," Caley said with finality in his tone. "It'd be an easier death than I would get otherwise. Fraser, you got to gimme some help with this hand an' then yuh got to get me outa here. Turn me over to the sheriff. I'll be safe from that outfit with him. That's all I can say. You help me or I die. By God, let it ride that way. Help me or don't help me, but I tell you nothin'."

Don saw that the man was far more afraid of that gang than he was of death.

He took out a handkerchief and bound it around Caley's hand, knotting it about the wrist so that the flow of blood was checked.

"Where's your horse?" Don asked.

"Up the draw a ways."

Don nodded to the puncher who had taken Stevick's gun.

"Get his horse," he said.

The puncher returned with the horse.

"You and one of the other boys take him to town," Don directed. "Get him to the county jail and have a doctor called for him. Caley, you met with an accident. I don't want the sheriff droppin' down on us just yet."

"They said you was an easy mark,"

Caley lamented. "I kin see you are a lone wolf your own self. Well, no! You got sense enough to pick a few helpers. But you ain't no easy mark. I won't say nothin' to the sheriff or nobody else."

The punchers helped him to his horse and the trio rode away. The sun had set now and darkness was coming rapidly in the draw.

"Come over here, Stevick," Don ordered. "You are a candidate for a doctor's care, too."

Stevick advanced toward him slowly through the gloom. Don stood peering at him for a moment. Mac and Joslyn and the two other punchers gathered round.

"Stevick—" Don began.

He stopped on the one word. There was the sound of horses rapidly approaching the head of the draw.

"Mebbe it's Renshaw," Don said, and to the two punchers: "Watch Stevick." To Mac and Joslyn: "Come on, boys. Let's be ready for 'em. A surprise party might not go so bad."

They ran to the head of the draw and waited there. Out in the valley the darkness was not so thick as it had been in the draw. They could make out two horses bearing down on them.

CHAPTER V

Aloof Bess

"FOR Pete's sake!" Don exclaimed as the riders drew nearer, and he added: "Stay here, boys."

"It's ol' Lacy's girl an' another," Mac said.

Don rode out to them. As he did so, he saw Bess Graham stop her horse and hold him back. Jean came on till her horse was alongside Don's. He saw excitement in her eyes. She leaned over to him.

Don's eyes went briefly to Bess. She was not looking at him. She was staring straight ahead, between her horse's ears. She made Don feel as if she were frozen in her saddle. Don did not like that. She was not the Bess he had always known. When Jean started to speak, he stayed her with uplifted hand.

"I reckon somethin' has happened, Bess," he said. "Can't you come up here and let all three of us get in on it together?"

Bess woke up a little. She lifted her head and turned her face toward him. The ice of her frozen state was still with her, however.

"Jean can tell you all there is to tell," she stated. "It is something Jean is interested in. She merely got me so she would have company."

"Uh huh," said Don. "Well, what is it, Jean?"

"Do you know where Robert is?" Jean asked.

"Gone to town, I reckon," Don answered. "He has sold his ranch."

"Sold his ranch?" the girl repeated. "Why, that's impossible."

"Then he has done an impossible thing."

"I knew there was something wrong," Jean declared. "I'll tell you: I rode over to see your brother again this afternoon. A queer old man was sitting outside. I asked him where Robert was and he merely jerked his thumb toward the door. In a few minutes while I waited, wondering, Robert and that man Renshaw came out. Their horses were ready. Robert only nodded to me and they mounted and started to ride away. I asked Robert where he was going. He said he was just going for a ride. There was something strange about him. He kept glancing at Renshaw as if he were afraid he would say something that Renshaw wouldn't like. I don't think he went to town."

"Why," Don said, "he wasn't at home when I was there earlier in the afternoon. He couldn't have been to town and have got back by the time you arrived there."

"Did you go into the house?"

"No."

"If you had I think you would have found Robert and Renshaw sitting there, waiting for you to leave. You must have left just before I came."

"That's the funniest thing ever I heard of," Don said. "Where do you s'pose they've gone?"

"Those men didn't buy Robert's ranch," Jean asserted. "If they did, Robert must have changed his mind. I talked to him yesterday and he was full of his plans for the ranch. For one thing he said he was going to show you he was not the mollycoddle you thought him."

"I never said he was a mollycoddle," Don said.

"He thought you felt that way about him. Well, the important thing is that there appears to have been a sale of the ranch to Renshaw. Renshaw is suspected of being a criminal. I think he has got some kind of a hold on Robert."

Don thought so, too. His thoughts went to Stevick and Caley. He believed he understood now why Caley had held him up. Caley had doubtless been going to take him to wherever Renshaw was. That seemed a more open move than Renshaw would have made on his own account. He was doubtless acting under instructions from his hard-boiled old dad.

"I'll see what I can do, Miss Lacy," he said. He turned to Mac. "Call one of them boys to ride home with the girls," he said.

Bess was turning her horse. She flashed a look at him over her shoulder.

"You needn't trouble," she said. "We came alone. We can go back alone."

"There is trouble brewin' here," Don said. "You might meet somebody."

"You will need your men," Jean put in. "If you call one of those boys I will tell him to stay here. He will take orders from me."

SHE wheeled her horse, and she and Bess put spurs to the animals and dashed away. Don stood looking after Bess's retreating figure rather glumly.

Mac came along, his gun in his hand. He urged Don to blow Stevick apart. Stevick murmured something about murderin' him.

"You was all set to murder us," Don retorted.

"Well, gimme a chance," Stevick whined. "What is it you want to know?"

"You get the idea, don't you?" Don sneered. "Where's Renshaw?"

"I dunno," Stevick answered. "I ain't seen him for sev'rul days."

"He has got an outfit," Don said. "Where is it? Where has it been hangin' out?"

"Gawd, if I tell you ol' Renshaw will kill me," Stevick whined.

Ol' Renshaw, eh? That baldheaded old spider. He seemed to be the main kick in this thing. Even this hardened criminal was afraid of him.

"You fellas seem to think ol' Renshaw is a mighty man," Don said. "Tell me about him."

The story, as Stevick haltingly told it, was simple enough. Renshaw was an old-timer of an older West. He traveled, Stevick said. He had always had an outfit with him, men who would hesitate at nothing. He had been hiding out in these mountains for quite a long time now, after a serious escapade further south. He had picked up Caley and Stevick on his way in here. He never appeared in the open. He left that to his son. He would do anything. Yes, he had been stealing young stock since he had been here. He had a coupla hundred head hidden in the mountains. He had said only recently that he would have a place for them pretty soon, and then they would all turn respectable for a while. No, Stevick didn't know anything about the purchase of a ranch. Ol' Renshaw didn't take any one into his confidence. He only told them what to do. What sort of man was the younger Renshaw? Not strong on nerve. He would kill a man, though, if the odds were in his favor. Stevick had seen him kill one man whom the father suspected. It had been at night. There had been a single shot, and a bullet had gone into the man's back. The gang had ridden on, leaving the man where he fell.

"Well, where's this hang-out?" Don demanded.

"It's over on the other side of the mountains," Stevick answered. "I can tell you how to get there. You don't need to take me along. You know these mountains, don't you?"

"I tell you, Don," Mac put in. "Less leave this fella here under guard of one of these boys. One of them is shy a gun. This fella has no gun. One of the boys can tie him into knots if he tries to get away."

"Good idea," Don said. "Tell us how to get there, Stevick. Tell us straight, too. If you don't we will come back here."

STEVICK told them just where to ride. Don knew that he was telling the truth, for Stevick could describe the country through which he said they would have to pass. Their journey, Don saw, would take them till close to midnight. As the hangout, Stevick described

a bowl out of which a broad box cañon ran. This would, Don knew, provide just the kind of place an outfit like Renshaw's would be looking for. It was far from any habitation and no cattle were run in there. The way to it was over barren mountains and through draws as barren. However, right at the spot there was ample water and some grass for cattle.

"Renshaw must know this country," Don said. "He must have been here before."

"No; he is always lookin' for a safe place. We just stumbled on that place."

"We'll get our horses and ride, boys," Don said, after he had placed Stevick under guard of the puncher who had no gun. "How come you boys had no guns when you were supposed to be on a man-hunt?" he asked as an afterthought.

"We had guns when we started out," the man answered. "Caley an' this fella said they had none. We lent ours to them. They seemed to take charge."

"Did Caley have a rifle then?" Don asked.

"He didn't. I dunno where he got it."

"He must have had it hid here," Don said. "He wouldn't have had time to go back to camp to get it. I reckon them fellas have been doin' some plannin'."

"That's what we got jobs from Lacy for," Stevick volunteered. "We was to watch and to head any hunt that started from Lacy's."

"Has ol' Renshaw got men any place else?" Don asked anxiously. "At Graham's, for instance."

"No; he was goin' to have men scattered all through here, but somehow things seemed to come to a head all of a sudden."

As Don and the three men started on their long ride, Don thought he had the situation pretty clearly defined in his mind. His being disinherited had brought matters to a climax with old Renshaw. Young Renshaw had probably picked up gossip about Don's and Robert's affairs in the village. He had carried that gossip to his father. The father had seen that a youngster would be left in charge of a ranch. He had descended on that ranch. How he had persuaded Robert to sell, Don did not know. Doubtless threats had been used. Robert had ridden away with the younger Renshaw. Don did not believe that Renshaw would let him go to town. Old Renshaw had a deed to the ranch. That deed doubtless would be legal if Robert disappeared. Young Renshaw had shot one man in the back. He probably would not hesitate to shoot Robert.

"If you'll come out of your trance for a minute, you can tell us which way to turn here," Mac broke in on his thoughts.

Don's head came up with a jerk. He smiled sheepishly. He saw that they had ridden several miles while he had mused. Before him the mountains lifted themselves. They were on a crest which shouldered out over a cañon. They could go down diagonally on their left or they could turn to their right and pass through timber.

"To your left," Don said.

They dropped down, skirting the cañon, and came to a rocky floor. A ridge of shale jutted out from the mountain and they passed over this and came into a valley in which there was no growing thing. They followed this for three miles and came to a pass. This led them up to a plateau, and the plateau dropped down into another hard valley. This they followed for a long time while the night wheeled on its way.

At last they began to climb a long slope and presently they stood at the crest of the mountains. Below them was a pit of darkness, but Don knew that it had a floor. Beyond them were lower peaks. They had but to descend to that floor, cross to the peaks, and come to a draw. Beyond that, a hundred feet down, would be the bowl of which Stevick had spoken. The horses began the descent slowly, fearfully. After a time of sliding on their haunches and sometimes going sidewise to keep the precarious footing, the animals straightened out on the floor. The darkness was so thick that the men could not see each other's faces.

"Hop down," Don directed. "Drag your reins. We will go forward afoot. We can make it snappy. It's level enough all along here."

HE set out and the three other men followed him. They came to a break in the wall of the mountains. Through it they could see the lower stars shining.

"Hell," Joslyn said, "somebody has been havin' a dream. Them fellas didn't bring no young stuff this way from them ranches over there—onless they carried them in their arms."

"There's another way, easier but longer," Don said. "They could make it that way all right."

"I hope to tell you it'd have to be easier," Mac said.

Don led the way through the draw. The bowl, in darkness, lay below them. Don could hear the sound of falling water and he knew that a stream ran down from the mountains somewhere nearby. There was in the thin air also the smell of lush grass. He saw that this was a rare mountain meadow, a place in which grass grew rankly because of a favorable combination of water and soil.

They stood looking down for a while till their eyes should become accustomed to the gloom. Presently there was a stir below them. Blurred forms moved.

"Cattle risin'," Don said. "Some of them stolen calves has growed up. Renshaw has been here for quite a while. I'm hopin' them fellas has got careless as they naturally might."

He was sure there would be no night riding of the small herd which the Renshaws had got together. It would not be necessary. The cattle would not drift away from the grass and the water out into the barrenness of the mountains.

"If they have been here for a long time, they ain't been campin' out," Don went on. "There is some timber over beyond here. They would have built themselves a log cabin anyhow."

"An' a corral," Joslyn added.

Don could get a fair picture of what lay before him. There would be the cabin in which the men slept by night. There would be a big corral for their horses. There would be the stock corralled in a natural stronghold. The cattle by now would have Renshaw's brand. Presently when Robert had been disposed of those cattle would be taken to the ranch by stealthy night drives. Altogether it was a pretty scheme, Don had to confess. That ol' fella Renshaw must have a good deal of patience, but when he struck he struck quick and hard. He had gobbled a ranch when it had been out of Don's hands only a few hours.

By now Don could see the cattle plainly. They did not look to be in good flesh. Already they were moving about the bowl in small groups. Don supposed that the grass was giving out. Renshaw would have to move the stock before long or it would starve. Things had been breaking pretty well for Renshaw.

As he gazed across the bowl a light suddenly appeared on the far side of it. Don studied it, to make out whether it was the light from an open fire or whether it was within a building. He decided that it was the latter. It settled down till it could scarcely be seen, but still there was an oblong of it. Don was sure it was a light within a room beyond a small window.

"See it?" he asked.

The men murmured that they did.

"That's headquarters," Don said. "Somebody has either just got up or just come in. We better work our way over there. I ain't never been in this bowl, so we will have to go step by step. We will hug the wall as we go along. That'll bring us to that building in the course of time."

They descended slowly and as slowly began to make their way around the bowl. They came presently on a little group of young stock, just distinguishable in the night light. The cattle stopped and sniffed apprehensively. Together the men began to chant a cowpunchers' song. The cattle listened for a minute and then edged away. The men went on, Don in the lead. He was aware at once that there was a break in the wall at his left. A yawning vacancy seemed to be there. This, he guessed, was the head of the box cañon of which Stevick had spoken. Looking up, he saw that the peaks lifted themselves higher here. The cattle they had come upon had probably been headed into the box.

"Straight ahead, boys," Don said in a low voice.

On top of his murmur came another voice, husky, strong.

"Stop where you're at. Stick 'em up."

"Down," Don countermanded.

With the other men he went flat, drawing his gun as he did so. He could not permit a hold-up now. He knew that if he were taken prisoner he would never leave this place alive. The Renshaws had too much at stake. With the gun in his hand he whipped the hand over his head

and pointed it in the direction from which the voice had come. There was the sound of a footfall, as the man in there probably started for shelter. Don fired. There was a grunt, the sound of a plunging body, and then stillness.

CHAPTER VI

CAPTIVES

DON lifted his head and listened. He looked toward the light. In that instant the light went out. Then the shot had been heard.

Don could imagine what had happened. Some one was in a cabin where the light had shone. He had just arrived or had just risen. Believing himself secure, he had been preparing food or getting ready for sleep. That shot had come to his ears. He had had a moment of bewilderment. Then he had thought of the light and had put it out.

What would he do next? Indeed what would they do next? For Don had a notion now that more than one man would be in that cabin. Yet he could not leave without having a look at the man he had shot.

"Get up, boys, an' wait a minute," he said.

As the men rose, he ran into the box. His foot encountered a body. Standing with his back to the outside, he lighted a match and bent down. The light fell on a swarthy face, but it was not the still, masklike face of a dead man. The eyes were open, but there was life in them. They held a puzzled look, and Don judged that the man had just recovered consciousness. Don struck another match, and shielding the light let it travel over the upper part of the man's body. There was blood on the man's shoulder. Don saw that the heavy bullet, fired at short range, had smashed through that shoulder. The man tried to speak but his lips only writhed in pain.

"Take it easy," Don ordered. "It won't do you no good to bawl me out now. Keep still." Over his shoulder he called, "Mac."

Mac ran in and stopped beside him. Don directed Mac to cut away the shirt above the wound and to place a padded handkerchief over it. Then Don bound this down with another handkerchief. That would absorb the blood for a few minutes and then help it coagulate.

"Somebody will be runnin' over here in a minute," Mac warned.

"I know it," Don said. "That light went out. But we've got to have this fella. We've got to take him with us. He is prob'ly full of valuable tips."

"It'd be better for us if he was full of lead," Mac growled.

"I'm glad he ain't. Get them other boys in here an' we will carry this fella with us."

In a moment, under Don's direction, they were hurrying along the side of the bowl toward the place from which they had come. When they reached the draw, they stepped into it and laid the wounded man down. Don knelt beside him.

"Fella, I shot to kill you," Don declared. "I missed because of the dark. You come clean an' quick to me an' mebbe you will live to tell the tale. Otherwise—" he shrugged his shoulders. "There's a cabin over there, ain't there? I saw a light."

"Cabin an' corral," the man answered thickly.

"How many men?"

"Five if Moore has got back."

"Who's Moore?"

"Just one of us."

"Where's he been?"

"To meet Renshaw."

"Where's Renshaw?"

"I dunno."

THAT, Don perceived, was the truth. The man was thoroughly scared. He was in pain. He had answered such questions as he could with a certain eagerness, as if he wished to ingratiate himself with the man who had shot him.

"Have there been any strangers up here to-day?" Don asked.

"Not here. I heard a young fella was brought in to the other camp."

"This is a kind of outpost, eh?"

"Yeh."

"Where did all these cattle come from?"

"There ain't so many. Renshaw an' some of the other boys rustled 'em in here. They been at it for some time. It is a hard place to get cattle to. Renshaw has been layin' low for somethin'

better'n a few cows. I reckon he rustled 'em more to keep the boys busy than anything else, though he will grab anything he can. I ain't been here more'n a month. Used to know Renshaw down South. Happened to meet up with him again. He said he had somethin' on. I wisht I had a drink."

"I'll get you one after a bit," Don said. "No time now. I'll have to leave you here alone for a while."

The man turned his head away.

"Come on, boys," Don said.

He led them along the side of the bowl till they were near the far end. Here the shadows fell heavily and they cut across the bowl and came up on its other side. They proceeded softly, till they could discern the outlines of the cabin.

There was no stir about it, but there was a sound beyond it, along the upper wall of the bowl. Then there was the grinding of heavy feet on the rock. Three dim figures, bearing a fourth, came into view. They stopped near the cabin door and put down their burden. Two other men emerged from the cabin and joined their companions.

"Did they get him?" one of these asked, in the tone of authority.

"On'y through the shoulder," one of the carriers answered.

"What happened to you?" the first man asked accusingly. "What in hell were you doin' to let 'em get you?"

"They come to the head of the box sudden," the wounded man answered weakly. "I tried to stick 'em up. One of them shot me out of hand."

"You tried to stick 'em up," the other jeered. "Why'n hell didn't you shoot an' talk afterwards. Who was they?"

"I dunno. Four of them."

"We found him in the draw," one of the carriers explained.

"In the draw? How'd you get there, fella?"

"They drug me over there o' course. They said you'd lose time lookin' for me an' that would help them to make their getaway."

"Where'd they go?"

"Up through the draw. I heard their horses, going' hell bent in a minute."

DON, listening, was astonished. He could not imagine why the wounded man was trying to throw the others off the track. Certainly he could have no friendly feeling toward Don. Yet he was playing Don's game instead of the game of his companions in crime.

"Two of you fellas take your horses an' go up through that draw an' see what you can find out," the man in authority ordered. "I don't like the looks of this. I'll bet one of them fellas was that Don Fraser. Renshaw had a run-in with him this mornin'."

There was silence for a moment, and then there was a stir among the men. Two of them seemed to have backed away from the man who had spoken.

"You hear me," he snarled.

"We ain't goin'," one of those who had retreated said in a cold clear voice. "What d'ye think? Think we are goin' up that draw when them fellas may be layin' in it, waitin' for just such a move."

There was another indistinct stir on the part of this man and on the part of the other. Don could not see what they were doing, but he knew in a moment, from what the second man said.

"I got you covered, Moore. Make one move. Just one. I can see your hands. Keep 'em idle. No, stick 'em up. You, too, Sadler. You an' Moore has been altogether too chummy lately. I ain't liked the looks of things. Moore goes over to see Renshaw an' when he comes back and I ask him what's up, he says 'nothin'.' Well, mebbe! But that ain't the way I figger it. I'll take your guns till I see what's goin' on here."

He moved toward the man he had addressed and then toward another man beyond him, and Don was sure he took their guns. He stepped back.

"Now, you two other fellas, how do you stand? With me, I reckon. I been bankin' on it. I'm goin' to pay a visit to Renshaw an' have a showdown. You want to come along?"

"You betcha," they chorused.

"Come on, then."

The darkness took them at once. Don guessed that, luckily for himself, the corral was the other side of the cabin. That gave Don and his companions a moment for retreat. They went back along the wall a few steps and waited in the dark. Presently they saw the

three men dash across the bowl, indistinct, flying figures. They were making for the draw, and Don understood that that was the only exit from the bowl. Apparently they had not been afraid that anyone would be waiting for them there.

Don let them go. He was ironically grateful to them. They had done him an important service.

"We'll get these two before they wake up," he whispered. "They prob'ly have got guns in the house, an' they will be goin' for them."

There was no futurity in that action. As Don and the three others moved forward, Don saw the two remaining men run toward the door of the cabin. He spat a bullet against the cabin's wall.

"You fellas stop where you are," he called. "We'll riddle you next time."

But the men had courage of a sort. The foremost sprang through the door. The other was two feet behind him. Don fired at him, but because of the darkness he missed. The man dodged, however, as if the bullet had gone too close to him for comfort. As he straightened up and made for the door, it was slammed in his face. Don thought he was working at the latch, but he could not get the door open; and then Don guessed that the other man had dropped a bar inside it. He had no thought for the man outside nor for the wounded man on the ground.

"Come on out here, fella," Don called. "Make it snappy."

The man wheeled away from the door and came running toward them, his hands in the air.

"Get that d a m n e d skunk," he screamed. "Don't let him get away. Why, he slammed the door in my face and dropped the bar."

For him that was sadly true, but his manner of voicing it, his impotent rage, were ludicrous. In the air his hands worked as if he clawed for something he could not reach.

"Any windows in that cabin, fella?" Don asked.

"Two on the side next the open," the man replied. "None on the far side or the other end. One alongside the door. You better get back. That fella is a killer an' he ain't afraid of nothin'. He will begin pepperin' you here in a minute."

IT was good advice and Don withdrew his men. He looked up at the wall beside him. There was a shelf up there, some dozen feet from the ground. If he could gain that shelf and creep along it, he could reach the far side of the cabin. Then he could do something which he believed that man in there would be afraid of.

"We got to take a coupla chances, Mac," he said. "I'm goin' to the far side of that cabin. You circle out an' watch the door. If that fella comes through the door, poppin' bullets, you pop one or two your own self."

"One," said Mac. "If I miss the first shot, spite o' the dark, I will shoot myself."

"Gimme a hand up here, Joslyn," Don requested.

Joslyn hoisted him up toward the shelf. He obtained a meager fingerhold and Joslyn hoisted him. He got a knee over the edge and drew himself up. He was immediately aware that the dawn was coming. There was a perceptible lightening of the air, and the odor from the bowl seemed accentuated. There was a smell of water and grass as if the earth were wakening with the approach of the sun. Don had often observed this phenomenon before.

He was in semi-darkness as he started along the shoulder of rock, but he had taken no more than half a dozen steps when the light grew incredibly. Don knew that the sun was almost up beyond the mountains and that the light would grow here with amazing swiftness.

The man in the cabin had apparently done just what Don had thought he would do. He had found a gun and he had come to the front window alongside the door. A bullet suddenly shattered the glass and struck the rock above Don's head. He knew the man would take more careful aim for his second shot, believing he had time. Don therefore threw himself flat and dropped from the shoulder. He was diagonally away from the window now, and he ran toward the corner of the cabin. Evidently the man inside had been taken by surprise, for he did not fire till Don was almost beyond his range, and then the bullet did not come within two feet of Don. He gained the blank side of the cabin in safety.

He knew that the man could hear him

because of the shattered glass, and he laughed loudly enough for the sound to carry. He was sure the man would not relish ironic laughter. The man did not. He proved himself an adept in profanity. He cursed himself, Don, the other men, and things in general.

"All of which is fac's," Don agreed, "but what are you goin' to do about it?"

"I'll kill you," the man cried.

"Pshaw, I thought we was goin' to have some fun," Don jeered. "One of your side-kickers said you was a real killer, an' here you are on'y threatenin'. I never heard a real killer threatenin'. I think you are a milk-an'-water guy."

There was a time of silence. The man had exhausted his temper in his outburst, and now very likely he was taking stock of his situation.

"What do you want?" he asked guardedly.

"You," Don answered.

"What are you goin' to do with me?"

"Hang you or shoot you prob'ly. I dunno which. We got bullets an' ropes."

"By God, I'll fight it out, then."

"You will fight with your lungs full of fire an' smoke," Don told him.

"Fella, you wouldn't burn me out."

"Wouldn't I? You don't need to stop, because you ain't doin' anything that bothers me, but if I was you I would look an' listen. You will hear the crackle of flames in about a minute."

"What if I come out?" the man asked, fear in his voice.

"Why, I got a man standin' over beyond here," Don answered. "I dunno what he will do. It'd depend on how you come out, I expect."

"I got just one gun," the man declared. "Look! Here it comes through the window."

A gun landed on the ground beyond the cabin.

"I will come out with my hands so high my arms will be loose in the sockets," the man promised.

"Well, don't talk about it. Do it!"

There was the sound of a bar being lifted and the opening of the door. Mac's voice came, light, cold:

"Keep 'em high, fella. I promised to shoot myself if I missed my first shot at you, an' the mornin' is breakin' so nice I just don't want to have to keep that promise."

Don came around the corner of the cabin. The outlaw was standing before the cabin door, his hands as high as he could lift them. He was a big man, bearded, unkempt. He turned fiery eyes on Don. Don's jesting mood fell from him. He looked at the man with fire in his own eyes. He lifted his gun a little. Slowly the fire died out of the other's eyes. He wet his lips. His glance sought the ground.

There was a flood of light all over the bowl. Don looked abroad. Cattle were working down toward the water, nipping at the scanty short grass as they went. There was no sign of the other men. This big man here would have to turn informer, Don saw.

"Fella," he said harshly, "you know where Renshaw is. I don't. I'm askin' you no questions, but you know what I want. Babble. Babble, fast, fella!"

CHAPTER VII

"He'll Kill Him"

ORDINARILY complacent about himself, overbearing, brutal, this man, Moore, could apparently tell when the jig was up. He was at heart a coward. He believed that he had just escaped being burned alive or shot down as he left the flaming cabin. The prospect of either of those fates had been enough to shake his nerve. Loyalty to the men he had been associated with was not to be considered, Don knew.

So Moore essayed an ingratiating smile. Don was aware that that was the forerunner of a plea on his own account. He would make a deal with Don if he could.

"No blarney," Don ordered. "It's information we want. Come through with it."

In a way Moore's mind appeared to be orderly. He could begin at a beginning.

"Them fellas that left here won't find Renshaw," he said. "Renshaw has been suspicious of them because they wouldn't go to the ranch with him. They think this idea of turnin' respectable is

crazy. I reckon their pictures is abroad in the land.

"Renshaw is now five miles from here, safely hidden out. He has got a young fella with him. He—"

"You know who that young fella is," Don stated.

"Well, your brother. Renshaw is goin' to kill him, come night. Then we are all goin' to the ranch—was goin', I mean."

"You can lead us to Renshaw?"

"I reckon I'll have to."

"It's the only way you'll save your skin," Don told him. "If there is the least little slip-up ,we will stick a coupla bullets into you."

"Oh, I'm down," Moore said.

Don turned to the puncher who remained.

"Will you help this fella carry that wounded man inside?" he asked. "Herd this fella Sadler in there, too. We will leave you a coupla guns. You can hold these men here till we get back."

The wounded man inside and made as comfortable as possible and he and Sadler under the puncher's guard, Don led Moore out to Mac and Joslyn.

"Of course we ain't trustin' this fella, boys," Don said. "We will set him on his horse after we get our horses, and then we will follow him. If you have to shoot him, don't waste your bullet, understand!"

"We will blow him wide," Mac said, and Joslyn only smiled grimly.

"Now, you get out ahead of us and ride, Moore," Don said. "Ride careful."

The ride was without incident. It carried them through mountains and into squat hills. Before they reached the edge of these, Moore halted.

"You are within half a mile of Renshaw," he said. "He has got four men with him. They are bad actors. That makes you five to three."

"Five to four," Don corrected. "You are with us, aren't you?"

Caught as he was, Moore had a flash of insolence.

"My gun would be for hire if I had one," he stated.

"Not to me," Don said. "I only meant that you will be on our side except for what fightin' there will be. I'm goin' to use you to prevent a fight if I can. Hop down, everybody."

THEY dismounted and "tied" their horses. Don instructed Moore to lead them toward Renshaw's camp without making a sound.

"Lemme know when you are within shoutin' distance," Don instructed.

The ripple of hills to which they presently came was not much higher than their heads. Moore stopped.

"Them fellas could hear you from here," he said.

"Not me," Don grinned. "You!"

"They will kill me if I double cross them."

"If they know it. Now, I'll tell you what you do: me and these boys will hide out. You will yell for help. When them fellas come, you will pretend that you are all in. First sound you hear, down you go. When they bend over you, whisper 'water.' They will want to know what has happened to you. That will give us our chance. Now, listen, ol' timer. You must know that these boys are poison with their guns. I can shoot a little my own self. If we was amatoors, we wouldn't be in this business. We would have sent some men that wasn't amatoors. If you try to whisper a warnin' to them fellas, we will know it. They ain't clever enough not to betray themselves. Are we all set?"

"I can't help myself," Moore answered.

"All right! When I give the word you yell. Leave the rest to us when them fellas come."

They climbed over the billowing hills and were screened from view.

"Do your stuff, Moore," Don ordered.

Some real terror must have been running through Moore. It was in his voice when he yelled half a dozen times. Then he dropped down and lay with his face pillowed in his arms.

There was silence for ten minutes, but Don did not grow impatient. He knew that those men would be alarmed by that cry. They would spend a little time trying to decide what was best to do. Then if they came they would come cautiously.

They came cautiously. Mac and Joslyn knelt below the little ridge while Don peered carefully over the top of it. His first intimation that Moore's call had been heeded came when there was a whisper of sound directly across from him. The men had indeed been cautious. They had not come running down the minia-

ture valley which lay between this ripple of hills and another across from it. They had screened themselves by those other hills and now, Don was sure, they were over there just beyond where Moore lay.

Don knew that when a head was lifted over the rim, the eyes would sweep everything within their view. He dropped down. Even as he went, he was aware that a head was being projected above the other rim. Scarcely breathing, the three men waited. The owner of that head was surveying the landscape just as Don had expected he would do. But now, at last, his eyes must have come down to Moore's prone figure.

"Hi, there, Moore," a low voice asked, "what the hell has happened you?"

An indistinguishable moan came from Moore. The man was playing his part well. With his face buried in his arms, he was unable to see whether Don was watching him or not. Probably he was afraid to make a move, for fear Don, if he were indeed watching would misconstrue it, and shoot him.

"Moore, wake up," the voice came more insistently. "Is there anybody hidin' hereabouts."

Don judged that Moore lifted his head just sufficiently to let his weak words flow to the questioner.

"Nobody here," he gasped. "They got me back at the cabin. Put me out. I hobbled over here and went down."

There was now the definite sound of at least one man coming over the hill. This again presented a problem for Don. The man might have from one to four other men with him. They might remain concealed while this man went down to the prostrate Moore. In that event they would have the edge on Don, if Don showed himself now. But, if Don and the other boys remained concealed, Moore might look around and find himself unobserved. It would take him only an instant to warn the man that there was danger.

LUCK favored Don. The man spoke, briskly.

"Tumble over, you fellas, an' less see what's goin' on here."

There was the sound of a scramble over the hill.

"Roll him over," came a command then. "See if he has got a bullet in him."

Don signalled to Mac and Joslyn to come up, and as they rose, he flung himself up the hill. His gun went over the top and covered three men kneeling beside Moore. He was aware that Mac and Joslyn were only a fraction of a second behind him. The three guns menaced the men down there.

Their eyes fixed on Moore, their hands busy searching his body for a wound, they did not know they were so covered. Moore was playing his part desperately well. His fear had paled his face above his beard. His eyes were closed.

"One of you fellas move, an'—well, just let us see you do it," said Don.

Doubtless those ruffians had held up many men in their time. Very likely they had been held up. Swiftly they seemed to calculate their chances. They were frozen for an instant in their kneeling attitudes, and then they moved apart from each other a little. If they were going to draw, they would do it now, Don knew. But the men did not draw. Their heads came up and three pairs of eyes regarded the guns.

"It's for you to decide what you are goin' to do," Don told them. "You ain't got much time."

The men flung their hands aloft as if those three pairs of arms had been directed by one mind. There they knelt, staring sullenly at their captors.

Don's thoughts now reverted to Robert. He supposed Robert was alone with Renshaw. Renshaw would have no means of knowing who had called for help. He had doubtless sent these men out to discover what had happened. But what would he do when they did not come back to report. He might finish off Robert as he had all along planned to do.

"Keep 'em covered, boys," Don said.

He topped the ridge and went along it a little way to give the two other men free range. Then he slid down and came up behind the kneeling men. He took their guns from them.

"Where's Renshaw?" he demanded.

"Jest a little ways from here," a man answered. "Up a draw. He's standin' there with a gun in his hand, an' I hope to Gawd he blows some of you suckers apart."

"Get up," said Don.

The man rose. Don thrust a gun into the small of his back.

"Over the hill," Don said. "Be fast

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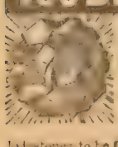

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but careful."

The man clambered over the hill, Don keeping so close behind him that he could touch him with the gun.

"Lead me to Renshaw," Don ordered. "If you make a sound, I'll tear you apart."

There was a little flat before them and at the edge of it another row of uneven hills, somewhat higher than these. The man went across the flat on light feet. He turned as he approached the hills and made his way along them. Then he went up the side toward a depression. Passing through this depression, with Don still within touching distance of him, he came out to the edge of the twin mounds.

"Renshaw is up this valley two hundred feet," he said. "It turns sharp there and angles through a draw. Well, Renshaw's horse and that young fella's horse ought to be here. We left 'em here."

"Renshaw has got them horses then," Don said. "He was goin' to run away from you fellas."

"He'd quit to save himself," the man conceded without anger. "Who wouldn't?"

Don had to get rid of this man at once. He knew that, unarmed, the man would not return to his guarded companions.

"Where's your own horse?" Don asked.

"Up this valley quite a little ways. We brought them two other horses down this mornin'. Renshaw was goin' to take that boy some place. I reckon he was goin' to—well, lose him."

"Yes, lose him," Don said. "Murder him where there were no witnesses. Fella, do you want to ride?"

"I don't want nothin' else."

"Get out of here then, but don't make no noise doin' it. If I lay eyes on you again, I'll plug you."

"I ain't got no gun," the man said, and he started down the valley on swift, light feet.

Don paid no attention to him. Now his thoughts were fully of Robert. Pity for that youngster welled up in his heart. This was a terrible situation for a youth who had always been taken care of to find himself in. Don imagined that Robert had drained the cup of terror.

HE could not be sure, either, that Renshaw was preparing to flee. The

man might have gone immediately for his own horse and Robert's merely to have them ready. He might be standing in that angle of the hills prepared to shoot and then run. He would figure that he could escape on his horse if his attackers were on foot as they were likely to be. And in his flight he might put a bullet into Robert. The most important thing he had to do now, as Don saw it, was to dispose of the chief witness against him and his father.

So Don sped across the valley and gained the hills beyond it. Climbing one of these he found that the depressions in them were so slight that they made almost a continuous ridge. If he went along them, he would come to that angle which concealed Renshaw.

He went along as rapidly as he could without making a noise. He was within thirty feet of the end of the ridge and had come to a walk when he heard a voice. He was sure that it was Renshaw's voice, though it was thickened with wild anger. Renshaw was cursing. Oaths came from his lips in a steady stream. At first they were directed at nothing. Then they became definite. "Damned bronc," came to Don's ears. There was then a sound as of a scuffle. Renshaw cursed again, definitely.

Don knew what was happening and he smiled. Renshaw was trying to get a bridle or a saddle on a refractory horse. Red in the face, jerking on the rein, cursing a steady stream, Renshaw was making futile efforts to bring the animal up to him. A moment of quiet would have done more than all his excited pullings, but his very excitement kept him from using his head to get the quickest results.

Don shot his eyes beyond Renshaw to where Robert was standing, not ten feet from him. Even as Don looked at the youth, the latter made a movement which froze Don with astonishment. Robert's quieter horse, already saddled and bridled, was standing a little apart from the other horse. Robert was moving stealthily toward him. He came to him and took up the rein. Then, walking beyond the horse, so that the animal was a shield for him, he led the horse till it was opposite Renshaw. Renshaw's back was to him, and suddenly Robert dodged under the horse's head and made for Renshaw. Don's gun was in his hand. He did not know what Robert intended

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precisely, but he knew that he would dispose of Renshaw if Renshaw turned on the boy.

Robert was behind Renshaw, and still Renshaw had not noticed what the youngster was doing. Robert reached out and plucked Renshaw's gun from its holster. As he stepped back, Renshaw wheeled. Unaccustomed to the use of a gun, Robert had delayed an instant before he brought the gun up. As he did so, Renshaw struck out wildly. He leaped and seized Robert in his arms. He was bearing Robert backward when Don went tumbling down the hill.

Don reached Renshaw in half a dozen leaps, and Renshaw was not aware of his coming till Don seized him by the shoulder, broke his hold on Robert, and flung him back. As Renshaw recovered himself Don handed his gun to Robert. Robert took it in an unsteady hand, and Don saw that he was breathing hard.

Don had kept his eyes on Renshaw. He saw Renshaw, now gripped by a deadly anger which swallowed up any fear he might have had, leap toward him.

Neither man was a boxer, so that there was no science in the fight that ensued. Don took half a dozen blows to the face and the body, but they did little if any damage. He kept boring in on Renshaw, and presently he knew that the man was weakening.

HE had struck Renshaw. Renshaw had fallen back. He came in again, but as he did so, he staggered. His ugly face was very close. Don set himself solidly and sent a crashing blow to Renshaw's chin. Renshaw's hands dropped, and Don struck him again. He fell, slowly at first and then heavily; and he lay in a crumpled heap at Don's feet.

Don turned to Robert. Robert stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Boy," Don said, "you're good. You got nerve. I'm stickin' with you from now on."

"Me?" Robert whispered. "Got nerve? I was scared stiff, Don."

"But got over it," Don smiled.

"They put a gun at my head up at the house, Don," Robert went on. "They made me sign a deed. Then they brought me here to kill me. Renshaw was just taking me away to do it. When I saw Renshaw was busy with the horse here, I asked myself what you would do if

you were here. I told myself you would get that gun. I tried to get it."

In his turn Don stared. He had influenced Robert, then? He had loomed rather large in the boy's mind. He would have to stick with him now. He would have to straighten him out in his work and keep him straightened out. He would have to become a puncher on the old place, with all its memories. Very well! Let 'er ride that way. Don Fraser thus relinquished his new freedom.

CHAPTER VIII

No Difference

THE party, gathered into one now, halted a mile from the Fraser ranch house. Don had one more job. He had to capture old Renshaw.

"You boys stay here," he said. "I'm goin' on alone. You wait for half an hour. Then come in."

As he spoke, he saw a glow in the younger Renshaw's eyes.

"Yeah," Don said, "I know what you're thinkin'. You're thinkin' your dad will get me. No chance!"

He waved his hand to his friends and rode away. When he came to the house, no one was in sight. He stopped his horse opposite the kitchen door. Old Renshaw would have had no means of learning what had happened, and Don did not think the old fellow would start hostilities. He would keep to his new rôle of respectable ranchman.

Presently the door was opened and Renshaw stood in the doorway. A look of eager curiosity came into the man's eyes.

"I'm lookin' for your son," Don said.

"He ain't here."

"I haven't located my brother in town," Don said. "Has he been back here?"

"Haven't seen him."

"Well, I reckon he has run out on me." Don slipped from his horse. "I'd like to ask you a coupla questions if you will step out here, Mr. Renshaw," he added.

"My hearin' is good," Renshaw stated. "Go ahead an' ask your questions."

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"Why, you don't need to be afraid of me," Don said slowly. "On the other hand—"

He did not finish that sentence. He let his gun finish it for him. He whipped it out and pointed it at Renshaw with a grin on his lips. He gave no order to Renshaw. He did not think an order necessary. The gun was eloquent.

At least Renshaw seemed to find it so. His glow departed and a sour rage came in its place. The killer stood revealed in place of the self-satisfied old gent whom Don had looked at there in the doorway. Yet he did not move. As Don advanced on him, he stood as if rooted. Don was three feet from him before Don spoke.

"Who is in the house?" Don whispered.

"Nobody."

"I have caught your son and his whole outfit," Don said. "Unless you tell me who you got on guard here, I will blow you apart. There has been some gun play up in the mountains already."

"I got one man here," Renshaw sullenly admitted.

"In the other room?"

"Yes."

"Invite me into the house," Don ordered.

"Come in," said Renshaw as heartily as he could.

He backed away from the door and Don followed him.

"Laugh," said Don. "Natural."

"Laugh?"

"You heard me."

Renshaw laughed. It was a rather high cackle, but Don thought it might have passed for Renshaw's laugh.

"Now, natural again, call that fella out here."

"Oh, Fred," Renshaw called.

There was the sound of some one crossing the room beyond. The knob of

the door was turned. Don was standing behind Renshaw, his gun leveled over Renshaw's shoulder. The door was pulled open carelessly, and a man with a gun in a holster stepped into the room.

"Up with 'em, Fred," Don ordered.

Fred's jaw went slack. He had that moment of indecision which sometimes comes to a man in those circumstances, but he at last suddenly raised his hands.

"Turn around and back over to me," Don ordered. When the man had done that, Don plucked his gun and put it on a table at his hand.

"Both of you march outside," he directed. "Take it easy."

The two gained the porch. Don was in the doorway. There was a thunder of hoofs on the road outside.

"Who's that?" Don demanded.

"Mebbe you'll find out." Renshaw snarled.

The party out in the road, Don knew, was made up of a number of riders. They were coming hell bent. They might be more of Renshaw's outfit. Well, let 'em come. Don knew that he might presently be riddled by bullets, but he would fire a few sure shots on his own account.

"I'll get you two fellas first if them men start anything," he said.

There was a slowing down of the riders at the road leading into the yard. Then they came on again. They came past the corner of the main part of the house. The eyes of all of them were turned toward the kitchen door.

Don had to laugh. He had to laugh at the sudden drooping of the bodies of Renshaw and Fred. He had to laugh at the looks of surprise and relief in the faces of Lacy and Graham, in the faces of Bess and Jean, and in the faces of the two men who were behind Graham and Lacy. The horses were pulled down. They milled together as they came around, and then they were drawn up across from the door.

"You got a couple there, son," Lacy said. "How about the others?"

Don gave him a rapid-fire report of what had happened.

"They'll all be in here in a few minutes," he concluded. "I got a notion that Mac and Joslyn will cut that half hour some. I wish these fellas could be taken off my hands. I ain't had no sleep an' I'm gettin' kind of droopy."

Lacy turned to the two other men.

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"Take 'em into the house," he ordered.

"You got the whole outfit, eh?" Lacy asked. "You found some cattle, too. Good piece of work, I'd say. What you think, Graham?"

"A good piece of work," said Graham stiffly.

THERE was the sound now of more horses in the road. These horses came slowly, to accommodate their pace to the wounded man. They turned in at the road and were drawn up behind the horses of the others.

"There you are, Lacy," Don said. "I'm turnin' the whole mess over to you."

"I'll take care of them," Lacy said. "You boys get that wounded man into the house. We will have a doctor for him if he needs one. Take the rest to the sheriff."

In ten minutes the men rode away with their prisoners. Graham looked at Mac and Joslyn, who had remained.

"You boys will be needed as witnesses," Graham told them. "You better get back on your jobs."

"We was gettin' kinda tired of our jobs," Mac grinned.

"You'll have to be around here for a while," Don reminded him. "You might as well be workin'."

"Mebbe that's so. Let's ride, Joslyn. We have had a little taste of somethin' else. Mebbe it will last for a few months."

They wheeled their horses and were gone. Graham looked at Don severely. Up to now Don had not looked at Bess. He gave her a glance. She was looking away from him. Don's eyes strained to Jean. Jean and Robert had drawn together and were talking earnestly. There was something eager in Robert's face, and there was an answering glow in Jean's. Well, those two seemed better acquainted than Don had suspected.

"Can I speak to you a minute, Fraser?" Graham asked.

"Why, anything you got to say to me, you can say where you are," Don declared. "I tried to have some private conversation with Renshaw a minute ago, and he wouldn't stand for it. I reckon I stack up against you as well as Renshaw stacked up against me."

"Why, you can have it," Graham said

angrily. "I confess you have done a good piece of work. I ain't surprised at that. Nobody is, I reckon. My grievance with you is personal. You made my daughter cry, an' any damn' man that brings tears to her eyes has got—"

"Father!"

This was Bess, a furious Bess as she turned on her parent.

"He wanted it out in public," Graham declared, his anger growing. "He is gettin' it. Fraser, everybody thought you an' Bess was as good as engaged. All of a sudden when you lost your ranch, you —"

"He hasn't lost his ranch," Robert broke in. "He and I are going to be partners. The ranch is as much his as mine."

"He is goin' to work for me," Lacy put in. "I am gettin' old. He is just the man to take the burden off'n my shoulders. I—"

"Hell," said Graham, "not so fast, you two. I owe this fella an apology. An apology consistin' of words alone ain't no apology. You ain't no older'n I am, Lacy. I got a better ranch. I can give this fella a better job."

"Better ranch," Lacy stormed. "Better job. How do you get that way?"

"I can't take all these jobs," Don said. "I'm not goin' to take any of them till I have slept on it. Can't you see I am near dead."

"Heck, you don't look dead to me," Graham declared. "Anyhow you can keep your eyes open till I finish. When you lost your ranch, you spoke to my girl as if that was goin' to make any difference to her. You insulted her. Why, she ain't the kind of girl to figger money matters or ranches, if she likes a man. I've knowed all along that her heart was set on you. I was watching you. You stacked up good till you made that break. You—"

Don had been hearing what Graham said, but he had been looking at Bess. He thought Bess would be furious, but Bess wasn't that exactly. She looked to Don as if she were fighting back tears of mortification. Gosh, was there no way to stop that old man's babbling! He was still running on, saying the same thing over and over now, almost in the same words.

Don started to turn on him fiercely, but as he did so, he saw Bess pull back

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her horse. He knew what Bess was going to do. She was going to make a dash for it.

She turned her horse and started. Don jumped. Three leaps carried him to his own horse. Another lifted him to the saddle. As he wheeled his horse, Bess's was in the road. He immediately tore after it.

Bess could ride and her horse was fleet and fresh. Don's was a little tired. He had to ride a mile before he overtook the girl. Finding him at her horse's flank, she pulled her horse down. Don followed suit.

"There wasn't a word of truth in what my father said," she declared. "I haven't cried. Cried about you? Pooh, there are too many men in the world. Why, I'd forgotten what you said that time—almost."

DON did not reply. Bess turned her face front and they rode on in silence for another mile.

"Through stallin', Bess?" Don asked quietly.

"Stalling?" she repeated.

"If so," said Don, "I would like to talk to you about all these jobs. No poor puncher ever had so many offers in the same day. I think I ought to stick with Robert. What do you think about it?"

"He definitely will need your help," she said.

"Well, let's figger it all out," he said. "You know how much store I set on your advice, Bess. It'll be a straight business talk."

As a business talk it was a rank failure, for they had gone no more than a quarter of a mile before Don reached out and took the girl's hand. She tugged, but not very strongly; and in the end Bess had let her hand lie in his. That was most satisfactory for another quarter of a mile.

"Marry me, Bess?" Don asked.

"I'll see," she said.

A little coaxing, Don Fraser saw, was in order. A little coaxing, he discovered, went a long way with Bess. Pretty soon she was defending him from himself, so humble he became.

And finally they rode together contentedly, as they had done in the old days.

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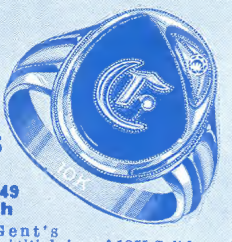

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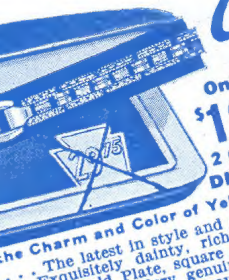

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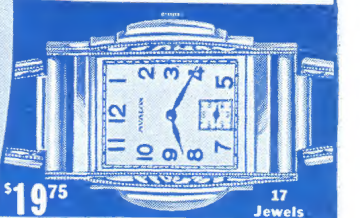

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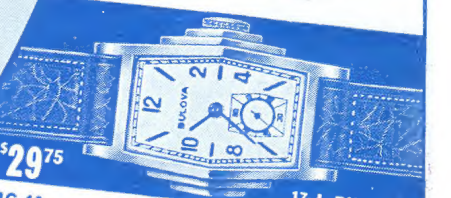

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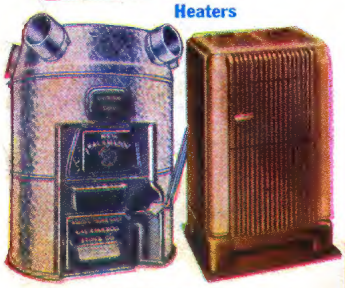

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